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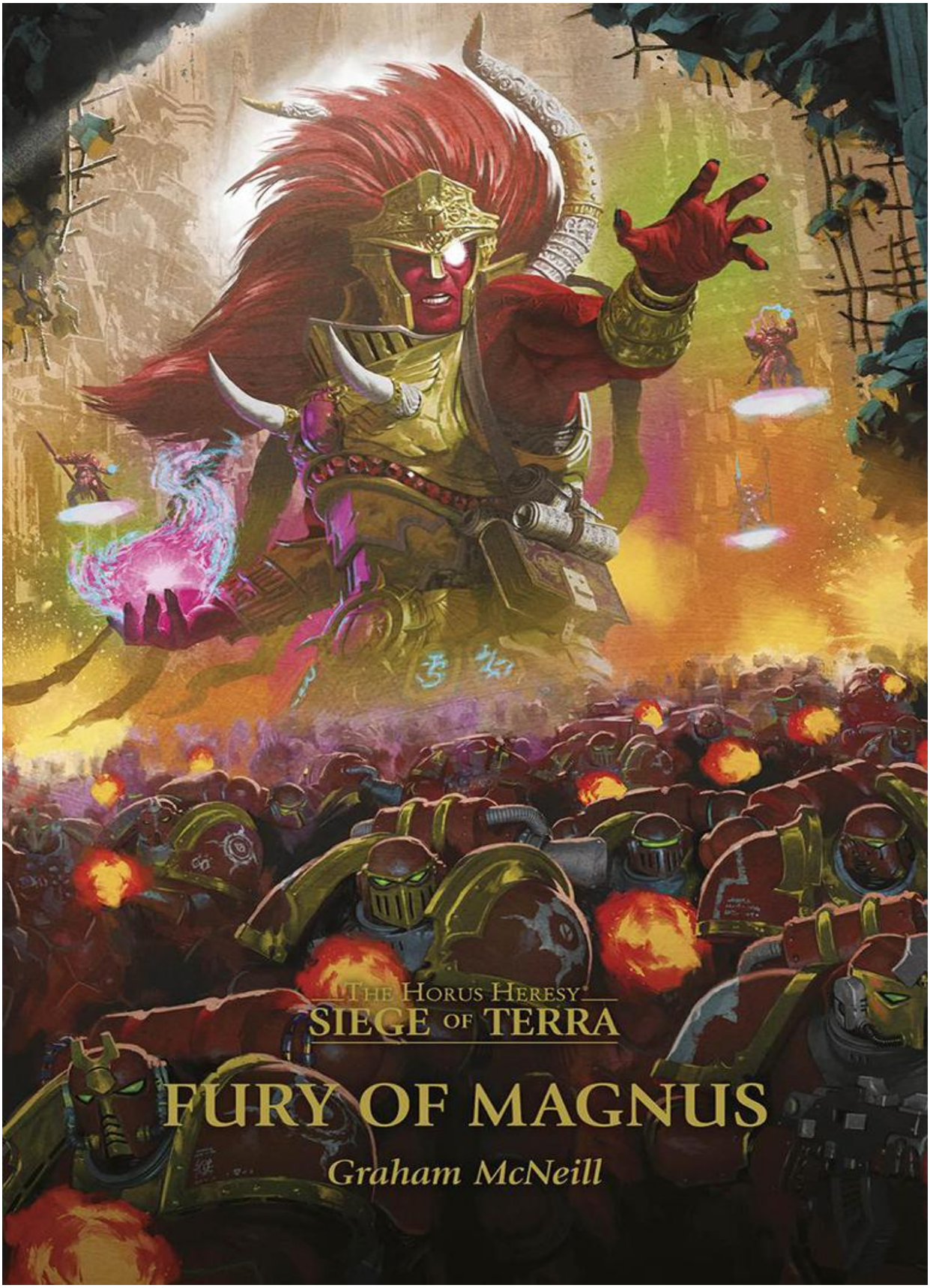
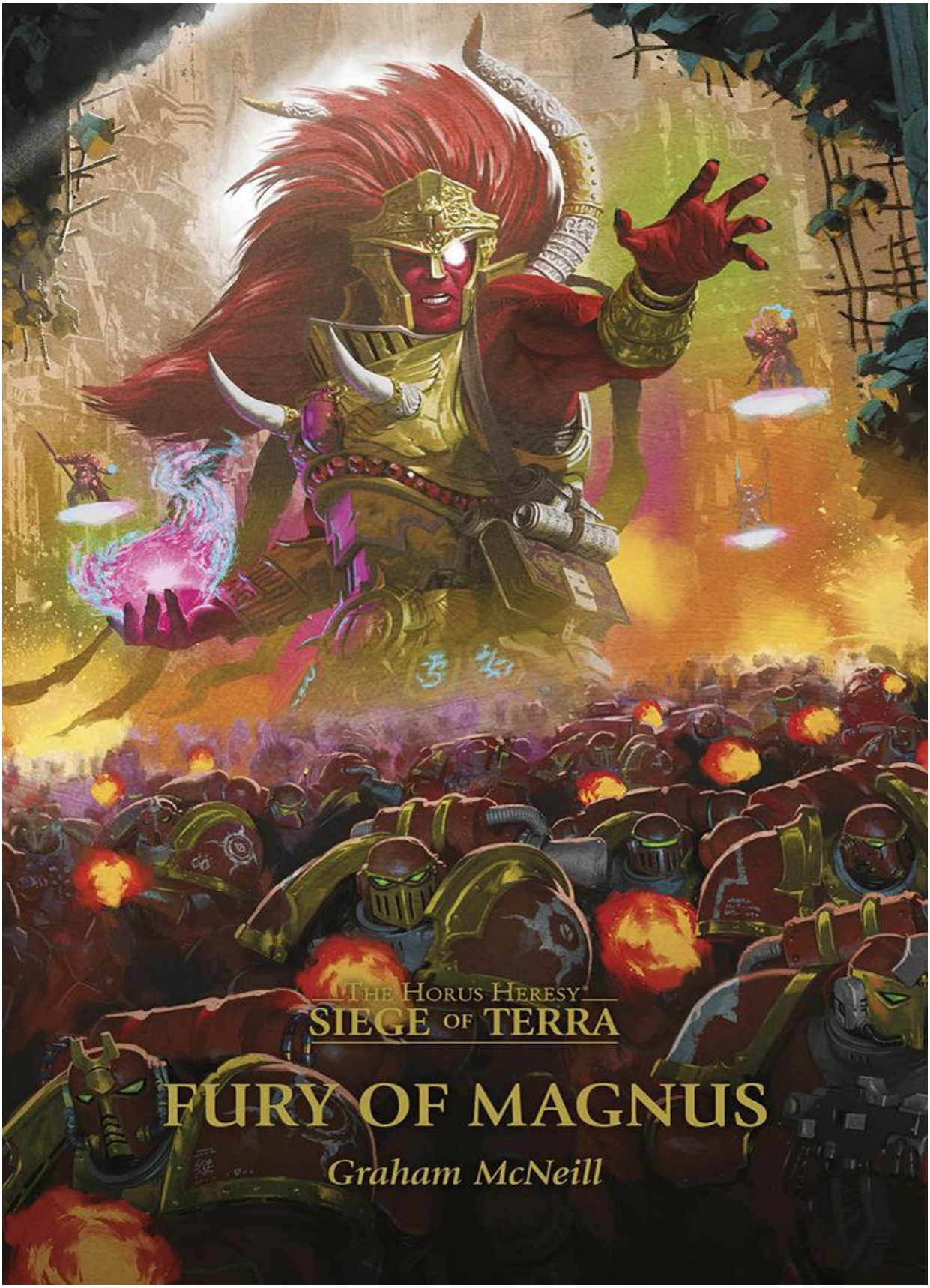

The Horus Heresy
Siege of Terra
Fury of Magnus
Graham McNeill


The Horus Heresy
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Fury of Magnus
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CONTENTS

Cover

Backlist

Title Page

The Horus Heresy: Siege of Terra

Dramatis Personae

Book One

One

Two

Three

Four

Book Two

Five

Six

Seven

Book Three

Eight

Nine

Book Four

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Book Five

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Afterword

About the Author

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THE HORUS HERESY®
SIEGE OF TERRA

FURY OF MAGNUS

Graham McNeill

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THE HORUS HERESY®
SIEGE OF TERRA

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions, are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath.

Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his

wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to

the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The end is here. The skies darken, colossal armies gather.

For the fate of the Throneworld, for the fate of mankind itself...

The Siege of Terra has begun.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The XV Legion 'Thousand Sons'

MAGNUS THE RED, 'The Crimson King', Primarch of the XV Legion
AHZEK AHRIMAN, Chief Librarian

AMON, Equerry to the Primarch

MENKAURA, Adept of the Corvidae

ATRAHASIS, Equerry to Ahriman

The VI Legion 'Space Wolves'

BÖDVAR BJARKI, Rune Priest of Tra

SVAFNIR RACKWULF, Woe-maker of Tra

OLGYR WIDDOWSYN, Shield Bearer

The XVIII Legion 'Salamanders'

VULKAN, 'The Lord of Drakes', Primarch of the XVIII Legion

ATOK ABIDEMI, Draaksward

BAREK ZYTOS, Draaksward

IGEN GARGO, Draaksward

The IV Legion 'Iron Warriors'

PERTURABO, 'The Lord of Iron', Primarch of the IV Legion

Imperial Personae

MALCADOR THE SIGILLITE, Regent of the Imperium

ALIVIA SUREKA, Perpetual

PROMEUS, Wyrd-wraith

'War is father and king of all. It proves some to be gods, and others merely human.'

– The Weeping Philosopher

'Cannon crashes eastward: magnificent, terrible thunder. Bright flash, night bordered, a surging mass explodes in storms of iron. Pageants of fire again, again. In savage awe, we celebrate the festival of death.'

– Pyotr Nash (First Lieutenant, 77th Europa Max)

'History is trying to tell the truth through the most acceptable lie.'

– Hari Harr, Imperial interrogator

BOOK ONE

SANCTUM IMPERIALIS

ONE

Time of Trial

The day was dark with the smoke of a burning world.

His armour's chrono indicated it was morning, but all divisions of time were virtually meaningless now. Day, night, morning, evening… they all blended into one span of flickering, hellish light that painted everything in the colours of a banked hearth-forge.

The distant glow of molten rock backlit misbegotten giants lumbering on the horizon, and plumes of fire from ruptured bedrock flickered low to the ground as boiling clouds of searing ash drifted over shattered ruins.

The Time of Trial was an extinction-level event on Nocturne, a time of fire and endings during which its Promethean moon would pass so close it would all but tear the planet apart. Clashing gravitational forces reached deeps into Nocturne's bedrock to wake the world-serpents coiled around its molten heart. Stirred from their deep slumbers, the ur-drakes roared and raged, shaking the world above with the fury of their fractured dreams.

Their terrible heat surged forth in the lava of a thousand volcanic eruptions that blotted out the sun. The movement of their titanic limbs shook the world with cataclysmic earthquakes that reshaped Nocturne's continents, and their breath sent boiling tsunamis to smash its coasts. And in the aftermath of their ferocious waking, a terrible winter fell upon the land as they returned to their slumbers and their searing fury subsided.

In such times, life beyond the protected walls of Nocturne's Sanctuary Cities became all but impossible. The plains camps, mountain holdfasts and coastal settlements emptied as Nocturne's people sought their fragile safety.

Their gates would be flung open, and any who requested shelter would be offered a place within.

Atok Abidemi had seen only one Time of Trial before he had been chosen to join the ranks of the XVIII Legion, the Salamanders. He had been a boy, no more than four Terran-standard, but vividly remembered the sky afire with lightning as it raged with the warring of gods and the wrath of the world-serpents. Even as a child, he had seen meaning in the play of flames in the sky, fated significance in each peal of thunder and crash of volcanic fury.

Fleeing the approaching pyro-storms, his parents had abandoned their nomadic life on the T'harken Delta and sought refuge within the walls of Skarokk, the city of the Dragonspine. All Abidemi had known was a life on the plains, hunting the leo'nid with his father and grandfather, so when the gates of the Sanctuary City closed behind him, Abidemi felt the terrible claustrophobia of being trapped in a place from which there could be no escape.

That same sensation held his heart in a cold grip again.

Yet this was not the Dragonspine and he was not on Nocturne.

This was Terra.

But it *was* a Time of Trial.

'Stand to!'

The cry went up along the wall, all but drowned out by Indomitor's blaring klaxons.

Another alert, but it wasn't for them, not yet.

Abidemi flexed his fingers on the grip of *Draukoros*. Longer than a standard chainblade, the weapon was toothed with the ebon fangs of the great drake of Nocturne whose name it now bore. Once, it had belonged to Artellus Numeon, but with his disappearance upon Mount Deathfire, the honour of its use passed to Abidemi.

The shadow cast by its former bearer was long, and both Abidemi and the blade understood he was only its custodian. The blade would *always* be

Numeon's, and it was Abidemi's fervent hope that one day he would return it to their fiery home world.

That hope was fading with every passing day, and as the discordant clamour of war pulled him back to the present, the tragedy engulfing Terra swelled around him.

White ash fell like snow. The sky burned with fiery colours, and the relentless drumbeat of war buckled the air with a continual rumble of explosions and big guns that would never tire.

He and his two Salamanders brothers were stationed on the Indomitor Wall, the towering north-eastern bulwark of the Sanctum Imperialis, the very heartland of the Emperor's Palace. It resembled nothing so much as a vast cliff carved into the bones of the mountains, twelve hundred metres tall, with an inner mustering ground behind the shielded and reinforced ramparts of its outer wall, which stepped down to layered outworks before diminishing to the ruined edges of the western Katabatic Plain.

Its outer faces were reinforced with steel and stone, its once glorious bas-reliefs peeled away at Lord Dorn's decree. Its function ality was brutally simple, the newly raised drum towers, turrets and enfilading gun-boxes turning the fifteen kilometre strip of smouldering ruins beyond into a killing ground of almost perfect proportions.

In any conventional engagement, it would be a nigh-impregnable barrier, but the war the traitors had brought to Terra was anything but conventional.

Braying war-horns and screams issued from the host currently attacking the wall. Six times they had come at its defenders in the last two days, and six times they had been thrown back. Their thwarted howls were those of beasts, and to Abidemi's ears they sounded like a barbarian horde from an earlier epoch.

Smoke and a seething orange glow limned Indomitor's broken-toothed defences on this seventh attack, where fifty thousand soldiers fought the blood-maddened host. Explosions and plumes of blue-green fire rippled up

from the base of the wall far below. Percussive blasts rocked the walls, chewing the rockcrete in fiery bites with every impact.

Shell blasts swept the parapet in storms of shrapnel, gunfire plucked troops from the firing step in droves, and the screams of the wounded were drowned out by the hammer blows of heavy artillery. Frag shells burst overhead, shredding flesh and stone, splintering the walls. The air was thick and toxic with a mixture of fyceline, propellant and promethium fumes.

Blasts from the autocannon turrets and the artillery mounted on the battered slopes of the Hegemon behind them answered the roar from beyond the wall.

But it would make little difference, the enemy host was seemingly without

number.

This portion of the wall was designated Indomitor Three.

As much a name for us as it is the wall, thought Abidemi. *Perhaps if–*

A blackened smiter's gauntlet clapped him on the shoulder guard and a voice with the sharp accent of a Sanctuary City-dweller said, 'Focus, brother.'

Abidemi nodded, lifting his head from his contemplation to regard his battle-brother.

Barek Zytos was a solid mountain of dark skin and battered warplate that had somehow retained its dark green lustre, even amid the constant ash falls and tarry smoke banks drifting from the burning ruins of the Anterior Barbican and the smashed Brahmaputra Wall.

Abidemi and Zytos stood with Indomitor Three's reserve force, ten thousand soldiers and twelve ad hoc squadrons from a score of different regiments. This deep into the fighting, hundreds of Terra's regiments had been effectively wiped out and their scattered survivors quickly organised into scratch battalions with no names save any they gave themselves.

In honour of the Salamanders in their midst, these soldiers had named themselves *Vulkan's Own*. Normally such presumption on the part of mortals

would have angered Abidemi, but in this place, at this time, he understood the honour these brave men and women did them. Once, their uniforms had been different in design and colour, but weeks of fighting in the mud and gore of Terra had rendered them all the same grey-brown and painted their exhausted faces with ash and grief.

They watched the fighting at the ramparts with a mixture of anger and horror, fearful of the slaughter being unleashed, yet eager to advance and push the enemy from the walls.

Abidemi understood that feeling all too well.

It railed against his warrior soul to stand and watch brother soldiers of the Imperium dying, but he and his brothers' strength was best spent when it would have the greatest impact.

Sensing his dark mood, Zytos nodded to the bloodshed on the wall.

'This is a bad one,' he said. 'Yes, a bad one indeed.'

Abidemi grunted. 'Has there ever been a *good* assault?'

'You know what I mean,' said Zytos, interlacing his fingers on the drake-skull pommel of his mighty thunder hammer. The weapon's killing head sat

between his feet, engraved with scenes from the forge, its haft a length of unbending adamantium. 'The man who always looks to the sky does not see the drake at his feet.'

'And the man who looks to the ground does not see the winged dactyl,'

finished Abidemi.

'Brother, are you here?' asked Barek. ' *Really* here? Since Vulkan passed into the Palace your mind has wandered too often of late.'

'Apologies, brother,' said Abidemi, shaking his head. 'We sacrificed so much to bring the primarch to Terra… I feel lost without his presence.'

‘He *is* here,’ said Zytos. ‘Doing his duty to the Emperor. As we must.’

‘You’re right,’ said Abidemi. ‘But this war saps my soul as much as it tests my body.’

Zytos rapped his knuckles on the pommel of his hammer and said,

‘Concerns of the spirit must be put aside until after the fighting’s done.’

‘You’re wrong,’ said Abidemi. ‘We must win both together or else we lose everything.’

‘I’ll put my faith in this,’ said Zytos, swinging the hammer up from the ground and hefting its immense weight as easily as a mortal man might swing a walking cane.

Barek Zytos had ever been the most direct of his brothers, as was only to be expected of a man born to the city of warrior kings. The drakes cut into the onyx skin of his skull were markers of the beasts he had hunted on the Arridian Plain, and his words provided a much needed anchor for Abidemi.

‘And though he’s young, I put faith in *him*,’ continued Zytos, nodding to where Igen Gargo stood scanning the ramparts atop the turret of a rust-brown Shadowsword. Above him, the unending barrage of shells and lasers flared and burst against the aegis shield: relentless impacts from orbit and plunging fire from distant batteries. The swirling patterns rippled like the violent borealis of the Time of Trial.

The colours reminded Abidemi of looking deep into the fires of a forge ready to receive metal. It was said a master smiter could look into a furnace and know the exact moment to thrust the iron into its heat, when to turn, and when to withdraw it just by listening to its song.

Zytos had led them back to Terra, but of the three of them, Igen Gargo was the master of reading the fire’s song.

Gargo scanned the fighting, ready to call out any weakness or predict a

rout. The burnished metal of his augmetic arms reflected the light of explosions, and fire danced in the red lenses of his battle helm.

Abidemi followed his gaze, but it was impossible to guess where one part of the line would bend or break. Lightning-shot smoke all but obscured the fighting, and the sounds of clashing metal and gunfire was much the same at one point as it was at another. Vast shapes reared up, bloated silhouettes and angular snapshots of unnatural creatures the enemy had pressed into its ranks.

Zytos lifted his helm and snapped it into place with a hiss of pressurised air.

'Here,' said Zytos, turning to retrieve a pair of battered breacher shields from the ground behind him and handing one to Abidemi. 'It's not Promethean craft, but it'll do.'

Abidemi nodded, scabbarding *Draukoros* and clamping the shield tight to his arm.

The yellow-gold metal was thick and dented, the ebon fist at its centre chipped and silvered by a hundred or more impacts. It felt unnatural to bear wargear marked with the heraldry of a Legion not his own, but these were desperate times and the shields had not failed them yet.

'It'll be soon,' said Zytos, looking back towards Gargo.

Abidemi snapped his own helmet on and engaged the gorget seals. Even insulated from the atmosphere, the air tasted of ash and burnt iron. His visor lit up with targeting information, damage assessments and energy-depletion warnings.

'How can you tell?' he answered.

'I can't read the fire as well as Gargo, but I can read him,' said Zytos.

'Stand to!' yelled Gargo.

'Told you,' said Zytos as the vehicles around them roared to life, reactors powering up and drive mechanisms shrieking like the magma vents of the Pyre

Desert. Blue fumes belched from exhaust grilles, and commanders unfurled pennants of dead regiments upon their antennae.

‘Watch the right,’ ordered Gargo, pointing a silvered arm towards the wall.

Abidemi scanned the fighting.

‘What does he see?’

‘I don’t–’

A thunderclap of shield failure was swiftly followed by a titanic blast that

shook the staging area with the force of an orbital strike. Colossal blocks of stone lofted skyward as something exploded just below the level of the rampart Gargo had indicated. Abidemi couldn’t see what had caused it, but a hundred-metre portion of the wall simply vanished in a blinding sheet of fire. The ringing echoes of its detonation were deafening, even within his helmet, and his auto-senses dimmed to shield his eyes against the incandescent brightness of the explosion.

It seemed the battle paused for breath, as though death were admiring its handiwork.

Gargo leapt from the Shadowsword’s turret as a ululating roar swept up the molten remains of the wall. He too hefted a breacher shield and ran to join his brothers at the centre of the line.

‘Into the breach?’ asked Gargo.

‘Once more,’ agreed Zytos.

He lifted his hammer high and raised his voice beyond the tumult.

‘Indomitor! *Into them!* ’

With Abidemi, Gargo and Zytos forming the tip of a charging wedge, the reserves of *Vulkan’s Own* advanced into the fire and smoke. Abidemi saw the half-molten shape of a siege belfry, monstrous shapes surging from its buckled

assault gates: *migou* giants in heavy suits of heat-resistant plate and iron helms beaten into the forms of daemons. Each was a hulking abhuman carrying a belt-fed chain gun and with a drum-like ammo hopper bolted to its spine. Roaring with idiot hatred, they braced themselves and unleashed the full fury of their weapons.

Two-metre tongues of fire blazed from their flared muzzles. Hundreds of men went down in the first volley of scything, high-calibre shells.

Indomitor's advance faltered, but pushed on into the storm of fire and steel.

'Into the fires of battle!' yelled Gargo.

'Unto the anvil of war!' answered Abidemi and Zytos.

Abidemi felt dozens of bludgeoning impacts on his shield, each one striking with the force of a forge-servitor swinging a sledge hammer. He gritted his teeth, locking his arm at ninety degrees as he slotted his bolter into the shield's firing notch.

More of the migou gunners were mounting the walls, unleashing fresh torrents of fire into the flanks of the defenders.

Clawed ladders and piston-driven grapnels bit stone. A tide of degenerates

swarmed behind them, scrambling for a foothold on the walls. Little more than a howling mob wielding crudely stamped weapons and mass-produced guns, but there were so many. So very many.

Prioritise. *Execute*.

'Take out those gunners!' Abidemi shouted.

Hammering impacts buckled the curved plates of his shield, the power of the shells making Abidemi feel like he was advancing into the teeth of a pyro-storm. He lined up a shot and fired his bolter, the hard bang swallowed in the thunder of gunfire. One of the abhuman gunners fell back, its chest blown open. He fired again, and another dropped to its knees with half its torso

ripped away. A third migou vanished in a pyre of streaking rounds as a mass-reactive detonated inside its ammo hopper.

Abidemi's visor pinged each of the migou in turn. Pull the trigger: an enemy dead.

Single shots only. Not enough ammunition for any wasted shells!

Another target lit up, limned by his visor. Another round, another dead.

Then he was in amongst them. He clamped his bolter to his thigh and swept *Draukoros* from its sheath.

'Numeon!' he roared, hammering the foe with his shield and reaping a bloody harvest with every butcher's cleave of his sword.

His weapon was an extension of his arm, and he tore apart heavy plate and pallid flesh with every strike. The blade's shrieking teeth chewed through the armoured migou with all the hunger of a Nocturnean drake, devouring steel and flesh and bone with every ripping roar.

The enemy matched his bulk. Abidemi couldn't just smash them aside with his own mass. He kept moving, giving the migou no time to bracket him nor give his mortal enemies a chance to pin him in place with their numbers.

His shield was a bludgeon, pistoned forward to make space.

Breathe and swing. *Hack and cut.*

Each migou was a powerful foe, but they were *slow*. He slammed the hard edge of the shield into their faces. Ram the sword up and under their plates, twist, withdraw. Turn and move, do it again.

The slaughter was machine-like.

Repetition made it instinctual and unthinking.

Abidemi felt the presence of his brothers. Their grunts and oaths over the

vox were wordless, but he understood every one. Zytos swung his hammer with a forging cadence as Gargo spun and lunged with his spear, scything and impaling men like wriggling fish.

The men and women of *Vulkan's Own* fought with rifle, pistol and bayonet; with iron bars or whatever else came to hand. The fighters were woven together so densely it was all but impossible to tell friend from foe.

Men clawed at their enemies, bloodied fingers tearing off masks and thumbs gouging eyes.

This was not the war the remembrancers had spoken of in the earliest days of the crusade.

War, when it had come at all back then, had been filled with glory and heroics fit for song. Not this frenzied brawling in the mud of the Throneworld, scraping for a rusted blade to open a throat, or a chunk of fused masonry to bash in a skull. *This* was the true face of war: a desperate fight for survival; a scrambling, maddened horror in which only the insane survived.

All else was but a soldier's lie.

Abidemi slammed three men from the walls, their broken-limbed bodies spinning over the rampart to fall two hundred metres to the ruins below.

He let out a shuddering breath.

Remember to breathe! Take in oxygen. Turn and fight!

He'd fought to the very crest of the breach, where the vast detonation had broken the rampart. The full horror of the broken landscape before Indomitor was revealed, and the shocking sight of the enemy was like plunging into an ice bath after a hard march over the Pyre Desert.

Abidemi had heard the estimates of the enemy's order of battle, the impossible numbers thrown around by Lord Dorn's strategos. He'd seen the vast shadows cast by the drop-ships blotting out the sky over Lion's Gate space port, and had fought this war long enough to know just how many of his fellow Imperials had cast off their oaths of loyalty.

But each time he saw the unending horde ranged against them, it broke his heart anew.

The force attacking Indomitor spread like an undulant sea beneath a choking layer of petrochemical smog. To Abidemi's eyes, it was like a host of pack predators swarming a leviathan at bay. Larger, battle-bred creatures moved among them: hideous by-blows of the fallen Mechanicum that walked on stilt-legs and loosed violent squalls of corrupt binharic hate, and things that might once have been living, but were now armoured, chimeric monsters transformed by warp-spawned rituals.

Far to the south, the air rippled around the immense form of Titans as they strode from the Anterior Barbican to pummel the strongholds protecting the Eternity Gate. Heedless of the life-and-death struggles at their feet, the god-machines howled their fury from war-horns at their shoulders, but even those sounds were overwhelmed by the rolling thunder of explosions and shellfire.

A series of seismic detonations smashed into the slope below, pulling him back to the present as a killing rain of debris hammered down. More of the mortals swarmed the breach below him. They fired their weapons into the air, hooting like maddened beasts. Huge stalk-tanks bristling with spikes and heavy ordnance stomped among them. Through the twitching smoke, Abidemi thought he saw the red-and-gold heraldry of swift-striding leviathans.

Too small to be Titans, even predatory Warhounds. Knights…?

He knew he was exposed here, backlit by the smoke and flames swirling around him, but didn't care. He *wanted* them to see him, to know the Emperor's warriors were not afraid of them, that the traitors would pay dearly for every step inwards they took.

This was an enemy driven by a hate Abidemi simply could not fathom.

A rippling string of ignitions bloomed in the smoke below, and the red-gold shapes strode from the fog banks in their wake. Low to the ground they came, heedless of the mortals they crushed beneath their splay-clawed feet: three giant bipedal forms with vast glaives and weapons mounted beneath wide pauldrons of bloody crimson and gold.

‘Morbidia,’ hissed Abidemi, recognising the spiked-helm sigil on the fire-blackened banner rising over the lead Knight’s skull-faced cockpit.

A crackling voice blared a warning in his helmet vox. *Gargo*.

‘Incoming!’

Abidemi looked up in time to see a salvo of Ironstorm missiles flashing downwards.

He closed his eyes.

‘The man who looks to the ground does not see the winged dactyl…’

TWO

Survivors

The Field of Winged Victory.

That was what they called this place, a vast marshalling ground older than Bhab, a place that had been here in the days before Unification, before even the Palace itself.

Alivia Sureka remembered watching the first starships to leave Terra from terrain now occupied by the nearby towers of the Clanium Library, back when the marshalling ground’s name had seemed fitting.

It had been a name to inspire greatness, to dream beyond humanity’s birthrock and seize the manifest destiny of the species.

Now it felt like a grotesque joke.

Back then, a hundred thousand soldiers left Terra every day from here.

Close to ten times that number now filled the open esplanade, but they weren't going anywhere: a living ocean of human misery. Numb with fear and daily atrocities, they huddled in makeshift refugee camps and shanties wedged between the Indomitor Wall and the canyon-precincts of the Hegemon. And this was but one of scores of such places jammed in wherever non-combatants could be accommodated.

High above the grand domes of Imperial bureaucracy, the sky bled its horror in purple bruises of light on the shield overhead. The air buckled with shock pulses from the constant ordnance barrages bursting against it.

Some of the plaza's earliest occupants had considered themselves the privileged few for having been granted access to the inner precincts of the Palace, but the inexorable pressure of the Outer Palace's systematic destruction had forced Terra's grandees to admit everyone.

Who was it that gave the order to open the gates?

Alivia doubted it had been Dorn.

Nor, she suspected, would it have been Valdor: the First of the Ten Thousand would have baulked at the notion of so many unknown souls this close to the Emperor.

The Sigillite then? The Master of Mankind had His gaze fixed on loftier outcomes than the survival of Terra's populace, but the Regent of Terra's voice bore the Emperor's authority.

So, yes, it would likely have been Malcador, which only went to prove that you could know someone for an eternity and still be surprised.

Alivia scanned the sea of faces around her, exhausted families aged by grief and coated in a fine layer of ash that fell like snow. No matter the money, position or power they had in the time before the Warmaster had invested Terra, they were all alike in fear. These were the survivors of Lion's Gate, the ruination of Angevin, or the Dusk Wall's breach, the razing of Magnifican. They had fled burning camps on the Gangetic Way, the Palatine's collapse or the loss of Dhwalagiri. Filthy, frightened and stained with mud, they watched

and prayed for the fighting to end, but most could care little for whoever stood triumphant at its end.

The sound of prayers, despair and tears was a constant refrain.

This is the sound of the end of the world: men weeping as their doom approaches.

Alivia tried to keep her own anguish at bay, but she had heard enough horror stories to last all her many lifetimes: dead loved ones, grievously wounded partners, sons and daughters fighting on the walls, and – worst of all – tales of parents whose grip had slipped, and who now frantically scoured the camps in search of their lost children.

Alivia remembered the sense of relief that had filled her at their arrival on Terra. The journey from Molech had been long and hard, but when she'd breathed the ferrous air of the home world, it felt like she'd managed to outpace the war at their heels.

A fantasy, of course. It was inevitable Horus Lupercal would eventually lay siege to his father's Palace, but the sight of what Rogal Dorn had wrought gave her hope it would be enough to stop the arch-traitor in his tracks. She'd believed they would be safe in Lion's Gate space port, the Starspear's incomprehensible bulk dwarfing the mountains from which the Palace had been carved. Its towering immensity was awash with weapons, plated from surface to space in fortifications, and manned by the gilded host of Lord Dorn himself.

Surely such an invincible fortress could never fall?

But fall it had. The enemy had driven a wedge into its heart and split it from its uppermost platforms to its deepest underways. The bridges linking its gantries to the Eternity Wall were still burning, its spires aflame beyond thick black clouds.

She'd heard tales of red-spined *things* hunting across those bridges, of people dragged down into impossible shadows. Alivia had seen a man and woman running for the safety of the bridge gates plucked from the ground by invisible

hands and torn limb from limb, the aerosol ising mist of their blood limning the frenzied outlines of claw-armed monsters.

Laughter had chased them from Lion's Gate, malicious gales of throaty amusement that weren't loud enough to overcome the deafening crescendo of battle, but somehow resonated within the vault of every mortal skull.

When she closed her eyes she could still hear that laughter, buzzing like a furious insect trapped in a glass. It had been days since she'd slept, but the bone-deep tiredness was better than the alternative. Her dreams were plagued with dark visions: nightmares of snakes, a lightless cavern far beneath the world and a doorway to somewhere endless and terrible.

The horrors of war broke many a soldier, even those who came through the fighting with their limbs and bodies intact. The psychic wounds of battle and the anguish of seeing fellow soldiers die or suffer horrific injuries was enough to sunder even the strongest mind beyond the power of any medicae to heal.

Alivia saw those self-same wounds on the faces of everyone she passed.

No matter who claimed the throne of Terra, they would inherit a populace as traumatised as any of the soldiers who had fought for it.

Alivia passed a group of kneeling men and women, grimy with mud and dust. Heads bowed, they prayed, mouthing words with hymnal cadence. A man with weeping chem-blisters covering his face and neck spoke words handwritten on a twine-bound sheaf of papers. He looked up at her passing and she winced to see that one of his eyes was a ruined, empty socket set in a molten mass of blackened tissue. The whiteness of bone gleamed through his cheek.

'Pray with us, sister,' he said, the words mangled by his wounds.

'No,' she said, turning away. 'I won't.'

'Please, the Emperor needs all our love and devotion to defeat this foe.'

Alivia snorted. 'If He needs *my* love then we're in even more trouble than I thought.'

She pressed on, easing through the crowds of terror-numbed people, heading towards the muster column at the centre of the plaza as the man called after her.

‘There is only the Emperor, and He is our shield and protector!’

Alivia shook her head. Since setting foot on Terra she had felt nothing of the Emperor’s presence. Even she had to acknowledge how strange that was. Even on Molech, there’d been a sliver of His presence, a ghost of His power borne on that damn light of His, but here in the heart of His domain… nothing.

Did that mean anything? Probably not, but still…

‘Alivia!’ called Jeph, and she looked up to see him and the girls exactly where she’d left them at the base of the column with their meagre possessions. She was struck again at how *thin* he’d become. Working at Molech’s starport had kept Jeph fit and given him some decent upper body strength, but the months of privation aboard *Molech’s Enlightenment* had taken its toll, and the thin food-pastes spooned out in the feeding tents were almost valueless in terms of nourishment.

‘What was that about?’ he asked, looking back over her shoulder.

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘Just another of those damn prayer groups.’

‘Lectitio Divinitatus?’

‘Don’t call it that,’ she said. ‘It’s just desperate people looking for answers where they won’t get any. It’s just blind faith.’

‘Maybe so, Liv, but could be that’s better than hopelessness.’

She wanted to rebuke him for so naive a belief, but she suspected he was right. Besides, no one seemed to care any more about such theistic beliefs, so long as they weren’t too overt.

Alivia supposed that, amid all this suffering, where any lifeline – no matter how flawed she believed it to be – could be the difference between survival

or giving up, faith would have to be enough. She just hoped it would wither on the vine after this was all over.

Alivia leaned in to give him a kiss and bent down to her girls.

Miska was asleep, curled up on a thin blanket and sucking her thumb like she'd done when she was a baby. Tiredness and hunger had hardened her once cherub-like features, and her shaven head only emphasised how gaunt she'd become. With every step deeper into the Palace they'd taken, Miska had spoken less and less. Day by day, Alivia's mischief maker was fading away, and she felt tears threaten to spill down her cheeks.

She rubbed the heels of her palms against her eyes then ran her hands over the stubbled skin of her own head. She missed her hair, but the itching had been too irritating. A plague of lice had spread through the refugee camps, and so she'd taken a razor to her hair and that of her family. Jeph hadn't minded so much, he was thinning on top anyway, but the girls had protested loudly until Alivia had shown them the wriggling eggs on each other's scalp.

Vivyen looked up from the chapbook that never left her side and gave her a wan smile.

Like her sister, she too was suffering, her features raw with a fever that left her sweating in the cold nights and freezing during the days, no matter how they tried to warm her.

'Did you get them?' she asked.

'I'm so sorry, my love,' said Alivia. 'I couldn't. There's none to be had.'

The fever had struck on the retreat from Lion's Gate, and the thin air of the mountains, the cold and the lack of food was exacting a fearsome toll on her daughter.

Alivia had tried to get counterbiotics from a twitch-faced man who sold pilfered medicae supplies, a man she suspected had stripped his uniform to hide in the civilian populace. He hadn't wanted to part with his pills for what she had to offer, and no amount of psychic effort had convinced him to lower his price.

John had always been the best at reaching into another's mind and bending them to his will, but she wasn't without some skill in that arena. Since arriving on Terra, though, she'd found her ability to *push* a person to her way of thinking had all but vanished.

'Don't worry, I'll be okay,' Vivyen said, turning back to the book.

Dust had all but obscured the image on its cover, and Alivia remembered how vivid it had been on the day she'd slipped into the Odense Domkirke to

steal it. The stories it contained were fairy tales, but that term was misleading. Each was a parable that spoke to the heart, stories that depicted the vast and complex tapestries of humanity in all their glorious and terrible forms. And like all stories, they had power.

A power Alivia didn't fully understand, but which had saved her life and her daughter's more than once. Those stories had kept Vivyen alive as a prisoner of a warp cult aboard *Molech's Enlightenment*, and they had offered up direction when Alivia had needed it most.

In that respect, was it so different from the *Lectitio Divinitatus*?

'What story are you reading?' she asked.

'The Nightingale.'

Alivia bit her lip. 'That's a good one.'

Vivyen coughed and said, 'I wish *our* Emperor had a nightingale.'

'Maybe He does,' said Alivia as she saw a man in a dress-black uniform and damask cloak coming towards her through the crowds of refugees. She recognised him immediately.

He came to attention before her, ramrod straight and with his hands laced behind his back.

'Khalid Hassan,' she said. 'I should have known you'd be back.'

‘Did you ever doubt it?’ he asked, his voice as tired as hers.

Malcador’s man had summoned her to his master’s side even before she’d stepped from *Molech’s Enlightenment*’s embarkation ramp, but had left without her. Even as she rebuffed the Sigillite’s summons, Alivia had known he would come again.

‘You’re looking tired,’ said Alivia.

‘This war taxes us all,’ he replied.

‘Hey,’ said Jeph. ‘She told you to get lost already. She’s not going with you.’

Hassan ignored him and said, ‘It’s time to come in from the cold, Mistress Sureka.’

Alivia looked down at her girls, tired and hungry, thin and fevered.

She nodded slowly and said, ‘They come with me. *All* of them.’

‘Of course. The Sigillite offers you and your family sanctuary within the Bhab Bastion.’

‘Then, okay,’ said Alivia. ‘It’s time for this nightingale to come home.’

Pyroclastic clouds of fire stretched from horizon to horizon.

The taste of ash and iron filled his throat.

The pain was like stabbing obsidian blades paring the flesh from his bones, like magma straight from the heart of Nocturne filling his marrow. It troubled him not, for he was a Son of Vulkan; he was born to endure pain.

Abidemi beheld the end of days wrought in volcanic eruptions and seismic fury. Nocturne was tearing itself apart in wracking spasms of catastrophic eruptions. Fire filled his vision and steam scoured his lungs to mulch as distant oceans boiled to vapour.

Even the towering permanence of Mount Deathfire split apart in this final apocalypse, its flanks rupturing as something deep within surged and raged in deathless fury.

Abidemi stood alone as his world came undone, its imperishable bedrock crumbling to ash and its molten heart exploding as the ur-drakes rose to destroy the realm of man. Searing sheets of lava spurted skyward from yawning fissures that pulled wider with every breath. Boiling clouds of superheated smoke rolled across the heavens, where forks of lightning powerful enough to obliterate warships clashed.

He felt no fear, for the Salamanders had no eschatological mythology, but rather a belief in the eternal circle of fire that spoke of life arising from even the most terrible catastrophes. To the tribes of Nocturne every worthy act of creation was born of destruction – from the creation of the stars themselves to the crafting of a mighty blade.

The basalt cliffs of Mount Deathfire finally came apart, exploding in a cataclysmic avalanche of rock and magma as two colossal shapes were birthed from its fiery annihilation. Twisting shadows of draconic fury moved within the molten rock, inhumanly vast and monstrous. Abidemi gasped as red-lit veils of lava fell in a burning rain that turned the earth to liquid fire.

Two ur-drakes roared as they fought, titanic beasts beyond any human comprehension of scale, so vast that Abidemi's gaze could not encompass the entirety of their cosmic nature.

One was scaled all in deepest green and onyx, with claws of fire and eyes like burning red coals. The other glowed with the dull light of cooling magma and Abidemi saw that one of its eyes was naught but an empty socket, like a crater gouged in the surface of a moon.

They tore at one another with jaws that could sunder continents, and raked armoured flesh with talons to shatter mountains. Their blood was the coursing power of the planet, and with each ferocious blow, the beating heart at the centre of the world slowed and cooled, even as the world above burned.

The crimson ur-drake snapped its jaws shut on the throat of its drakescale-green opponent, tearing away armoured hide and furnace blood. The wounded ur-drake drove its claws of fire into the belly of its rival, scoring deep gouges in its flesh. Horns gored and tails lashed as the mighty serpents of legend fought, but already Abidemi could see that the green serpent was losing.

Its gaze was fixed on the far horizon, and in a contest between such beings, even the tiniest moment of inattention was fatal. The crimson ur-drake bore the green-and-black drake to the ground, and the planet shook with the force of their impact.

Abidemi fell to his knees and wept as the crimson drake snapped and tore at the other.

He despaired to see the green drake laid low, knowing with every fibre of his being that it was vital it not die, that he owed everything to it. He reached for *Draukoros* and as he drew the blade of Artellus Numeon, two burning figures appeared at his side. One bore a golden spear of caged lightning, the other a hammer of thunder, and he knew them as his brothers.

Abidemi lifted *Draukoros* high, the fires of battle reflecting from its ebon teeth.

‘Father!’ he cried. ‘Your Promethean sons are with you!’

He charged towards the duelling world-serpents.

And his brothers in fire followed.

Then light, blinding and stabbing into his eyes like bright needles.

His vision of Nocturne’s ending faded as the terrible reality of Terra’s plight pressed in again. He felt the weight of his transhuman body compacted within the unyielding grasp of his warplate. Making sense of what he was seeing was proving difficult: both of his helm’s eye-lenses were cracked, and fizzing static overlaid his sight with ghost images he couldn’t quite make out.

Blood filled his mouth. His skin was sticky with it.

‘Barek!’ shouted a gruff voice he knew he should recognise. ‘I have him.

He’s alive!’

Abidemi spat a mouthful of dust and ash, blinking to clear his eyes.

He saw Igen Gargo silhouetted against a shifting pattern of colours. It took Abidemi a moment to realise he was looking up through several tonnes of smashed debris pressing down on him, and that the borealis above his brother was the underside of the aegis shield.

The pressure on him shifted as Gargo dug him from the rubble, the power of his augmetic arms hauling broken slabs of rockcrete and steel from his pinned body as though he were tearing flakboard from a wall.

‘Get me out of here,’ said Abidemi, flexing his shoulders. The rock groaned around him.

‘Hold still, Atok,’ warned Gargo. ‘That rocket strike brought half the damn breach down on you.’

‘I… I thought I was dead,’ he replied.

Barek Zytos appeared next to Gargo, his onyx skin pale with ash.

‘It’ll take more than half of Indomitor coming down to kill Atok Abidemi,’

he declared.

‘Not *much* more,’ muttered Gargo.

Abidemi’s arm came loose, and with both his brothers working to free him, enough of the rubble was removed for him to pull himself clear. The green of his armour was grey with rock dust, the metal and ceramite buckled and torn, yet mostly intact.

He climbed to his feet, and blinked in the pale light. Thick fog freighted with a strangely familiar taste shrouded the blasted edge of Indomitor. It obscured the

dolorous sound of the enemy camps beyond the walls, muffling the chants of the lost and the damned and making the war seem far away.

‘Morbidia?’ said Abidemi. ‘I saw Knights…’

‘Shadowswords and *Vulkan’s Own* saw them off,’ said Gargo.

‘Them and a Knight Castellan from House Cadmus,’ added Zytos.

Abidemi nodded, taking a deep breath and finally recognising the familiar taste of the surrounding fog. It was faintly sulphurous and bore the earthy aroma of deep rock and raw metal.

…like the breath of a wounded drake with scale-green hide…

Abidemi felt a fist clench in his gut.

A terrible fear that the enemy beyond Indomitor was not the one they ought to be facing.

‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘Vulkan needs us.’

THREE

Small Perturbations

It wasn’t supposed to be this way…

Magnus paced the interior of his pavilion, a high-ceilinged war tent floored in overlapping rugs, the patterns of which formed an interlocking series of spirals and geometric designs. The pavilion’s silken fabric pulsed in time with the primarch’s furious heartbeat, and with every rustle of fabric, tendrils of low-lying fumes and the distant crump of explosions crept in.

A crazed looking glass set in a frame of plain gallowswood stood in a far corner of the pavilion. Restored from broken pieces like diamond daggers, it threw out jagged reflections of the three warriors gathered around the primarch's expansive map table.

All were Corvidae: Ahriman; Menkaura; Amon. Crimson armour gleamed and their cloaks of stars were untroubled by the mud and ash of this world.

Loyal warriors all, and each a traitor too in his own way.

They felt the anger radiating from Magnus in palpable waves.

They fear my retribution, that I blame them for the failure at Colossi.

The pavilion's walls were hung with brass-framed images of manu scripts Magnus had recreated from memory after the destruction of Tizca's libraries: Shakespire's greatest soliloquies; the last, stubbornly resistant page of the Voynich Manuscript; and his favourite couplets taken from the works of Khut-Nah, Laban and Eltdown.

Every item within the pavilion was vibrating at a pitch just below its shattering point.

'Colossi should have fallen,' stated Ahriman, wary of his gene-sire's fury.

'Yes,' sighed Magnus. ***'It should have.'***

'The Corvidae *saw* it,' added Amon, rallying to his Fellowship brother's aid. 'We all saw the wall aflame and the great gateway reduced to molten slag. Ignis himself declared the numbers auspicious and the result a virtual certainty.'

Little affection remained between Magnus' equerry and his Chief Librarian, so Amon coming to Ahriman's aid was testament to how unexpected was this moment in time. Since Ahriman's return with Magnus'

scattered soul-shards, his star had risen among the Legion, something of which Amon had whispered darkly in the prophetic scriptures he kept secret from his brothers.

'The fault is not yours alone,' said Magnus, struggling to leash his anger.

'I too walked the future echo of Colossi's doom. I too watched the Pale King's warriors of dusk pour inside. I believed we had achieved what was necessary. And yet it **held.** ***The Khan and Valdor fought us to a bloody standstill!'***

The primarch jabbed a red finger onto the unrolled sheet of wax paper spread upon the circular map table. A vast swathe of the Himalazia region was rendered in exquisite beauty and vivid colours. At its centre was the hand-drawn outline of the Emperor's Palace: a vast agglomeration of enormous man-made structures that formed an urbanised continent spread across the mighty peaks of this ancient land. Squirming formulae of incalculable complexity were etched on the chart, distilled to their deepest truths by the Legion's magi.

Magnus tapped a detailed representation of the smashed Colossi Gate, its towers toppled and its walls broken. Red-gold flames of fresh ink seemed to shimmer on the paper.

Contrary to the broken icon and against all predictions, Colossi had *held*.

Neither Perturabo nor Mortarion were aware of Magnus' designs, but even the newly elevated Plague Lord sensed that success at the Colossi Gate had held greater significance to his brother beyond the obvious tactical value.

How had it held?

Magnus had no satisfactory answer to that.

'Colossi's fall was to herald the crack in the telaethesic ward of the Sanctum Imperialis,' said Magnus. ***'The Red Angel rages at its edge and Mortarion curses that he cannot cross its threshold. While it remains***

intact, the warp-taken can go no farther.'

'And you, my lord?' said Ahriman. 'Is the threshold barred to you also?'

'I am a numinous being of light,' said Magnus. ***'My subtle body is a weaving of broken flesh and splintered soul, but it is not yet fully given over to immaterial powers. If Colossi had fallen, yes, I could have stormed the heart of the Palace, but while it stands…'***

'It should have fallen,' said Amon.

'It was *seen*,' said Ahriman.

'It was seen,' agreed Menkaura.

Alone of the three Corvidae warriors, he kept his eyeless face obscured, enclosed within a featureless silver helm of an archaic armour mark. His aura spoke of hidden things, but Magnus cared nothing for whatever petty betrayals or schemes he had worked since Prospero's fall.

The primarch swept his finger into the Palace as the image of Colossi restored itself on the map, its towers rebuilding and its gate reforming from molten shards to once again become a hardened strongpoint. He spiralled his finger anticlockwise, moving gradually inwards.

'Khat Mandau Precinct, the Bhab Bastion, the Hall of Leng…'

Here, he lingered a beat, before moving on.

'…the Investiary, the Dome of Illumination, the Hegemon, the Clanium Library.'

His finger finally stopped.

'The Throne Room,' said Magnus. ***'The Warmaster's final objective.'***

They all heard the emphasis he placed on *Warmaster*.

'But never ours,' said Ahriman.

'But never ours,' confirmed Magnus. ***'Of all the prizes to be taken on Terra, of supreme importance to me is the subterranean arcology where lies the last shard of my soul.'***

A coiling red light lifted from the paper, like a splintered sliver of glass shorn from a larger whole. Magnus was reminded of his earliest explorations of Prospero, and the tall statue of a great bird left on a clifftop path above a long-dead city.

Its fall and shattering into multicoloured fragments of glass had revealed to him the secret workings of the Primordial Creator and taught him the mechanics of what would later become the Fellowships of the Thousand Sons.

'All broken things will break to their own form and purpose,' said Magnus. ***'My soul, the Imperium, even this war of Horus Lupercal's. So, understand this, my sons, what my father holds captive beneath His Palace is not simply*** **part** ***of me, it is the*** **best** ***of me.'***

'We will not fail you again,' stated Amon, beating a hand to his breast.

Magnus nodded, clenching his fist as he felt a tremor begin at the tips of his fingers.

He turned away from his sons and said, ***'Amon, Menkaura, return to your warriors and form mandala circles around the pavilion. Ahriman, remain with me. We will fly the Great Ocean, you and I.'***

‘Sire, is that wise?’ asked Ahriman. ‘The tides of the Great Ocean are turbulent beyond anything we have known. The Neverborn surge and rage at the veil. Let slip, they care not if what they kill is friend or foe.’

‘We must,’ said Magnus. ***‘Guilliman and the Lion draw closer every day, and still the Palace stands. If there is a way inside to be found, only* I *can find it, no matter what Perturabo thinks. Now do as I command.’***

Amon and Menkaura saluted and left the pavilion, and with their departure Magnus let out a shuddering breath that was not breath and felt the quickening of a heart that was not a heart.

He clutched the edge of the map table as a spasm of pain passed through him.

‘Sire, what is it?’ asked Ahriman.

Magnus held up a hand and said, ***‘My father wrought this body with ancient science, forgotten alchemies and a pact even He could not entirely fathom, but I am no longer sure what I became after the Wolf King shattered my soul.*** ’

‘You are Magnus the Red, the Crimson King,’ said Ahriman.

‘Once perhaps, but without the last part of my soul I am something more… and also something less.’

Magnus turned from the map table and stood before the broken looking glass.

‘Ten million shards of glass and tears…’ said Magnus.

‘Sire?’

‘I smashed this on Prospero when I destroyed my chambers in a fit of

rage. You remember? Just after I soared to Terra on warp-spawned wings,

thinking to warn my father of the Warmaster's betrayal.'

'I remember,' said Ahriman. 'It was the beginning of the end for us.'

Magnus shook his head. ***'No, our ending began long before that,'*** he said sadly.

He reached out and ran a red finger along the cracks in the glass.

'I always used to mock Angron for his loss of control, his bestial rages. I

believed him to be weak, but when I saw what I had done, I knew I was no

better than him. I thought so much of myself, that I was infallible, that I

knew better than everyone else.'

'Then why do you keep it, my lord?' asked Ahriman.

'I like to think that each shard displays a facet of my inner self,' he said.

'Some I know all too well, while others are reflections of unfamiliar

faces. Some are noble, some are wondrous, others miraculous. And,

forgive me, but many are dark and terrible.'

His trailing finger reached the centre of the looking glass, where a single, teardrop-shaped shard of glass was missing from the frame.

'But always at the heart of the image is this… **emptiness .'**

Magnus stared at the looking glass, and his splintered reflection stared back at him.

Tall he was, even among his brother primarchs, red-fleshed and corded with muscle.

Red hair billowed around his face like a lion's mane, held in place by a gold-and-ivory circlet helm. His armour was bronze with a horned breastplate, rippling with a promethium sheen of colours as if freshly forged. Long pteruges of the finest boiled leather hung to his knees, their length set with golden studs and carved with esoteric scripture.

His solitary eye was a shimmer of endlessly varied colours without name and set in skin the colour of molten copper. Magnus reached up to touch the crumpled skin covering where his other eye ought to be.

'With the merest thought, I can reshape my appearance, becoming

godlike or mundane, beauteous or monstrous but* this *… this I will not

change.'

He lifted his hand from his face and opened his fingers.

The tremoring was getting worse.

If Ahriman saw it, he said nothing.

'Join me, my son,' said Magnus, moving to the centre of the pavilion and

sitting cross-legged on the rugs at the confluence of their interlocking spirals. Ahriman took position opposite him, and already Magnus could feel the power of his sons flowing towards them as they formed mandala circles.

'You're right, Ahzek, it* is *supremely dangerous to fly the Great Ocean

just now,' said Magnus. ***'But I am running out of time.'***

He looked skyward as power flowed into him.

'We all are.'

Magnus lifted from his physical self with an ease denied his sons.

His flesh was already transforming from material to immaterial. Unlike Ahriman, he needed no enumerations to pick the lock on the chains that fettered spirit to flesh. The sense of liberation was intoxicating, like bearing an invisible burden on a mountain climb and then casting it off at the summit to take flight.

The earth fell away from him as his subtle body soared free. Ahriman's followed behind him, a spiralling comet of ivory fire. Freed from his flesh, Magnus was a being of pure energy, a being of divine origin unbound by the limitations of flesh. Neither hunger nor thirst troubled him, nor did the boundaries of space and time constrain him overmuch.

To a being such as Magnus, all time and space were his to explore.

They will be…

Magnus knew well the whispers of the warp, but even he could not say for sure whether that was some Neverborn temptation or his own vaunting ambition.

He rose up, borne by thundering updraughts of psychic energy.

Normally, flight through the Great Ocean was made in stillness and tranquillity, but the war beneath them was bleeding violent storms of emotions into the aether. Psychic hurricanes were raging all across the globe, amplified by the madness, anger and horror this war had unleashed.

Infernal tempests of furious psychic energy made the aether of Terra like flying a Stormbird straight into the Eye of Terror.

Most mortals knew nothing of this, but every living soul on Terra felt it in the darkness.

The constant terror and pain of the fighting was horrific, but the visions assailing them when they closed their eyes were far worse.

Beyond the psychic canopy protecting the inner precincts of the Palace,

Magnus saw a swirling morass of ghostly forms: the Neverborn circling like carrion crows anticipating the slaughter to come.

Horns, and claws…

Too many eyes and too-wide jaws…

Unquenchable appetites…

Ahriman flew beside him, his body of light a pure and perfect being.

'We burn too brightly, my lord,' he said, pointing to where trails of warp-spawned monsters rose towards them like plasmic storms lifting from a star's corona: lone predators, swarms of pack hunters, and gibbering hosts of raw fury.

Magnus grinned and said, ***'I dim my brilliance for no one, not for any***

man and certainly not for daemons.'

And with a thought, he was armed with his heqa staff and a khopesh with a bronze blade wreathed in fire. Ahriman followed his father's example, and moments later, he too was clad in armour and armed with his ebon-black heqa staff.

The swarming host rose up to them in a boiling tide of insensate hunger.

'Into them,' said Magnus.

Together, father and son fought as one, burning with fire and fury. The light of Magnus' khopesh cut the Neverborn apart, dispersing their essences like mist before a hurricane. Mightier than even the most terrible of the daemons, he spun and dived between them. He felt their claws upon him like talons of ice even as he burned them away with searing lightning from his eye and coruscating fire from his staff.

Magnus wove a web of destruction through the Neverborn, his staff and blade and power not simply killing them but *unmaking* them. Their screams were

piteous, but Magnus had no care for their dissolution, no thought beyond his own desire to reach out and *destroy*.

Ahriman matched his fury, a cathartic release for both of them after the failure at Colossi.

In the end, they were triumphant, blazing warriors resplendent amid tumbling scraps of sickly light that faded as they fell. Far below, the waking dreams and nightmares of mortals were filled with visions of fiery angels destroying the daemons, and depending on which side of the wall they fought, were either uplifted or plunged into despair.

‘ As above, so below **,’** said Magnus.

‘That felt good,’ admitted Ahriman.

Power surging between them, master and student looked down upon the surface of Terra.

As magnificent as Magnus’ map of the Palace was, nothing could do justice to the vista spread out before him. Only the bombed-out mega-hives of SudMerica came close to the scale of the Palace, and even they were mere shanties in comparison. Neither could the subterranean arcologies of Marianas or the sprawling predator cities of ancient Kievan-Rus hope to match its scale.

‘It is magnificent,’ said Ahriman, his form still bleeding off streamers of his battle fury.

‘It is indeed,’ said Magnus. ***‘In an earlier age, before the coming of the great hives of Europa, these mountains were the tallest peaks in the world and mantled in snow. Self-styled adventurers sought to conquer their lofty heights, and seekers of esoteric wisdom plumbed the secrets hidden in the darkness beneath them.’***

‘I remember Lemuel Gaumon telling me he had travelled here in search of a cure for his wife’s malady,’ said Ahriman.

‘A pity he did not find what he sought, but that path eventually led him to us, so perhaps it was not entirely a fool’s errand.’

‘I wonder if Bödvar Bjarki killed him on Nikaea,’ said Ahriman.

‘More than likely. Menkaura bound a fragment of my soul to his flesh. I imagine a zealot like Bjarki would cut him down as* maleficarum *as soon as we departed.’

Ahriman didn’t answer, but the ripples of colour running through his aura told Magnus that the notion of the remembrancer’s death troubled him, and he put concerns for long-dead mortals aside as he surveyed the ground below.

The mountains of the Himalazia were no longer capped with snow, but scoured black and grey, their hearts gouged by industry and their flanks clad in silvered steel to prepare the ground for the building of the Palace. They were still wondrous, but now that wonder was brutalist and all the more melancholic for the lost beauty they had once possessed.

The Palace traversed ancient boundaries of nations, filled entire valleys, occupied planed shelves of rock where mountains had once stood, and squatted on the surface of Terra like an ever-growing parasite. In rough form, the outer circuit of the Eternity Wall resembled the infinity symbol, a geometry Magnus could not believe was accidental. Intentional or not, the symbolism of that perfect form had been brutally disrupted by the attackers tearing it down, stone by stone.

So much hate and destruction… What will be left when it is done?

‘Rogal Dorn has worked miracles on the defences,’ said Ahriman.

‘I expected no less of my brother.’

‘True, but I had hoped for more from the Warmaster and Perturabo,’ said Ahriman.

‘In what way?’ said Magnus. He already knew the answer, but wanted to see if Ahriman had grasped the reality of Horus Lupercal’s war.

‘Our entire strategy seems to be built around the idea of simply battering our way in with brute force and attrition,’ said Ahriman. ‘I see no finesse nor flanking stratagems, nor any ruses to sway those within to betrayal. It has already cost so much to even reach the surface of Terra… how much more will the Warmaster be willing to pay?’

‘You grasp the truth of it, Ahzek. The true enemy is not the walls of the Palace, nor even my brothers and their warriors within,’ said Magnus.

‘No, for all of us, the enemy is time. Legions still loyal to the Emperor are even now traversing the void to return to their master’s side. If they reach Terra before the Emperor falls, then the day is lost. Horus knows this, and so the Palace must be smashed open with all speed. And if the cost of that is the blood of his brother Legions and his mortal followers, then so be it.’

‘By following such a strategy, the vanquished will be obliterated, and the victor little better,’ said Ahriman. ‘Whoever wins this war will be punch-drunk and reeling, their forces reduced to ghosts.’

‘This war has bled us, Ahzek, it has bled us **hard*****,’*** said Magnus, ***‘But we remain strong. Together with the warriors I sent away before Russ’ dogs fell on Prospero, the Legion numbers just over nine thousand. A paltry number by most reckonings, but one warrior of the Fifteenth is worth ten***

or more of any other legionary. Unlike Horus, I have been careful in husbanding the blood of my Legion for just such a moment.'

'Wait, are you suggesting what I think you are suggesting?'

'What do you believe I suggest?'

Ahriman's eyes widened as the implications of Magnus' unsaid words sank in.

'That you mean to topple whoever finally claims Terra's throne and take it for yourself…'

'Who among my brothers is as remotely suited as I for such a position?'

demanded Magnus. ***'Horus is already so rank with stolen powers that he burns from the inside out and sees it not. Perturabo might once have had the imagination to make such a leap, but it has been ground out of him. Angron or Mortarion are lords only of corpses and maggots, and as for Konrad and Fulgrim, they are not fit to rule*** **themselves,** ***let alone a galaxy.'***

He could see his son was still astounded by the idea, but that was only to be expected.

'Is this why we fly together?' asked Ahriman.

'I know it sounds fantastical, **treasonous** ***even,'*** said Magnus. ***'But consider this – we have all become so blinded by the idea that Horus Lupercal would see this war to its conclusion, that no other solution or***

outcome has even been considered.'

'I admit I had not contemplated it.'

'That is why it will work, Ahzek. No one will see the blow coming.'

'There is no other who could rule Terra like you,' said Ahriman.

Magnus nodded, pleased his greatest student had seen the truth of it.

'It will be glorious,' said Magnus. ***'Now, come, let us return to the world***

of flesh and blood, there is much we need to set in motion.'

They flew back towards the ground, passing through turbulent psychic squalls until the individual peaks of towers and strongholds were visible, their gilded domes and buttressed redoubts lit by the strobing glow of impacts against the shields.

Magnus was on the verge of allowing the weight of his physical form to draw his spirit back within, when Ahriman's voice halted him.

'Sire!'

He followed Ahriman's pointing finger to a segment of the wall on the south-eastern corner of the Sanctum Imperialis, a section near the confluence of the Adamant Wall and the Western Hemispheric.

At first he wasn't sure what he was seeing, a twisting line of golden light.

Faint and almost invisible, yet stark against the spectral resolution of the Palace.

It flickered in and out of existence, like an image of a lightning bolt caught

on a picter.

'What is it?' asked Ahriman.

Magnus narrowed his vision as he tried to fix it in place, but it twisted and danced before him, refusing to be pinned down. He reached out with his aetheric senses and recoiled as he sensed the awesome power behind the light and realised what he was seeing.

'Father…' breathed Magnus, not daring to believe that it was real. ***'You sit upon your throne, hidden behind your wards and shields. I should be blind to your presence – I*** **have** ***been blind to your power since you retreated within your sanctum – but now I see what I was looking for…*** **I see you…'**

'My lord, is that…?'

'That light is a whisper of the Emperor's power, a breath of His presence leaking from within the Palace.'

Ahriman's aura blossomed as he understood the significance of that.

'The crack we wrought in the telaethesic ward,' said Magnus. ***'Our way in.'***

FOUR

Wheels within Wheels

Encased in his grand lifter-throne strategium, the Lord of Iron was haloed by the flickering glow of his pict slates. His grim features were sheened with the pallid glow of the screens, his scalp pierced with cabling and studded with implants. Hooded eyes, always in motion, took in the vast quantities of data, processing and coordinating with every blink. Not even the greatest adept of

the Martian priesthood could match Perturabo's speed of cognitive processing in matters of war.

Every screen flickered with brutal imagery, passing too swiftly for the unaugmented eye to follow: thousands of updates from ten thousand separate engagements across this war front and hundreds more across the globe. Only a handful of beings throughout the entire history of the species could coordinate battle over so many complex theatres of war.

Perturabo's fingers – *artist's fingers*, thought Magnus – danced across invisible haptic keyboards, and with every stroke he sent scores of orders, altered multiple avenues of advance, or adjusted a hundred or more creeping barrages in real time.

To watch him was to witness a master craftsman at work.

More than any of his artificer brothers, Perturabo had been an artist and a creator. Yes, Vulkan had his forge-craft, and Ferrus Manus his proficiency with technology, but Perturabo had been an architect of beauty, a dreamer of things unimaginable to others.

Magnus remembered Perturabo's private repository, the walls of its many rooms hung with plans for grand theatres, awe-inspiring palaces wrought in

steel and glass, and cities of such grandeur that they approached Tizca in their ambition.

That so very few had ever been realised was an affront to his genius.

That his mastery was now employed simply to destroy was a waste of potential that still sat ill with Magnus, even as it now served his purpose.

On the heels of that thought, his eyes shifted to *Forgebreaker*, the mighty warhammer wrought by Fulgrim in the great Terrawatt forge of Mount Narodnya. Gifted to Ferrus Manus, it had been presented to the Warmaster upon his death, and subsequently passed to Perturabo.

The Lord of Iron had heavily modified the hammer, much to the Phoenician's chagrin.

Towering battle-automata cranked to face Magnus as he approached, Perturabo's Iron Circle. Their burnished metal skins were soot-blackened and pocked by recent shell impacts and las-burns after a desperate sortie of Imperial Thunderbolts had somehow managed to fight through the defences of the Citadel of Iron. The fighters had launched a desperate attack, and though every one of them had been blasted from the air, two had managed to strafe his position before ploughing their burning wrecks into his vantage point.

The upper observation deck was gone, sheared away by the wing of a tumbling aircraft, and thus this penultimate level was now open to the sky.

Bruised flarelight and booming shock pulses spread over the flickering remnants of the aegis shields as petrochemical conflagrations burned the sky in striated veils. Twisting firestacks danced like *ifrit* in the gutted remains of the Imperial Fleet College and made sport in the ruins of Aurum Bar. Radial processionals of gilded glory that had once hosted grand triumphs were rivers of brilliant gold, and their molten ruins were like the earliest days of a newborn world.

Plumes of smoke without number gave the air a gritty, acidic flavour, and the constant crackling of detonations drew the eye with phosphor-bright blossoms in every direction.

Before Magnus could speak, Perturabo said, 'I'm busy, brother.'

Brusqueness was nothing new to the Lord of Iron, and Magnus was not offended. After the failures of Saturnine and Colossi, the pressure bearing down on Perturabo from the Warmaster was immense and only increasing.

'I do not doubt it, but I would beg a moment of your time.'

'I would deny any of our other brothers,' said Perturabo, stepping down from his throne, 'but for you I will spare that moment.'

Magnus turned back to the vista of destruction spread before them.

'Soaring on the aether winds of the Great Ocean, it is possible to view

the siegeworks as something abstract,' he said. ***'As though it is a sculpted***

board in an exhibit meant to convey the scale of long-ago events to future historians. Untold millions are at war on Terra, slogging through mud, dust and bones to claw each other to death. Individually, their deaths are irrelevant. Even added together they are meaningless, just as each drop of water in a mountain river is meaningless. And yet still it cleaves the mountain.'

'This is how you would spend my time? In metaphor?' said Perturabo.

'Learn to curb your tendency to overspeak, brother. I have fifteen major assaults commencing in moments.'

Fifteen, auspicious.

'I only meant to say that the war looks different at every level,' said Magnus. ***'Saturnine taught me that.'***

'You mean Dorn taught us that,' snapped Perturabo.

Magnus needed no special sensitivity to see how deep the failure of Saturnine had cut the Lord of Iron. The long war for supremacy fought between Perturabo and Rogal had come down to this battle, this moment, and Dorn – that most singularly unimaginative of warriors – had somehow managed to outfox them all.

'We all underestimated him,' said Magnus. ***'We forgot that his talent would soar in response to your genius.'***

'Spare me the salve to my ego, Magnus. Rogal saw the weakness in his defence in time, and knowing I must have already seen it, baited us into a trap. It was breathtakingly daring. Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I would have thought my brother incapable of so astonishingly risky a ploy.

And letting the Eternity Wall go…'

'You believe he sacrificed the starport and everyone within it* willingly *?'

'Of course,' said Perturabo, looking at him as if he were a fool for not understanding the audacity of their brother's ploy. 'It would have been the only way he could convince me he hadn't seen the weakness at Saturnine. If I didn't hate him so much, I would congratulate him on such ruthless triage.'

'If even stolid Dorn can surprise us,' said Magnus, ***'then these truly are***

the end times.'

Perturabo shrugged, the plates of his armour rasping against the cabling of his skull. 'We were outmanoeuvred, it happens. But all our brother won was a brief respite. I *will* break open the Palace, that outcome is certain. The only question is how long it will take.'

'An important question given the unknown whereabouts of Roboute and

the Lion,' pointed out Magnus.

'I am well aware that the clock is ticking. So unless you have some new information or the power to slow time, let me get back to work.'

Magnus gestured towards Perturabo's lifter-throne and said, ***'The new***

attacks you plan, will one of them be against Western Hemispheric?'

'Yes,' said Perturabo. 'A pinning assault. I will throw troops against it and so Dorn must defend it. While they are engaged at Western Hemispheric and a dozen other fronts, the real blows will fall elsewhere. And don't ask me where, I won't tell you.'

'You don't trust me?'

The Lord of Iron's eyes narrowed, as though trying to decide if the question were serious.

‘You always have your schemes, Magnus,’ he said. ‘You brought your Legion to Terra with an objective not aligned with that of the Warmaster. I won’t pretend to understand what secret game you are playing, but I know you have held your warriors back from all major engagements, probing the walls like a caged animal testing the limits of its confinement.’

‘You’re right,’ admitted Magnus, circling the lifter-throne and its flickering pict slates. ***‘But in this moment, your goals, mine, and Horus’***

are in perfect synchrony.’

‘So what is it you want of me? And speak plainly for once.’

‘What if you could convince Dorn or his advisors that the attack on

Western Hemispheric was something more, say, by placing the Thousand

Sons in the order of battle as the Phoenician and the Third were at the

Saturnine Wall?’

Perturabo climbed back onto his lifter-throne, and the pict slates resumed their ultra-rapid cycling of war fronts. ‘What would be the point? The aim is to convince the defenders that any one attack could be the iron fist. To overemphasise one over another defeats that aim.’

‘Unless they believe the attack on Western Hemispheric is the main one

and divert additional strength to its defence. If Dorn must send

reinforcements everywhere, he will everywhere be weak.’

Perturabo shook his head. ‘You don’t know what you’re asking. Our forces are committed now – deployed, supplied, and already in motion. You more than most should understand that small imbalances on one front will have a correspondingly greater effect on another. But if you wish to commit your forces to the assault on Western Hemispheric, I will allow it. Submit your order of battle and I will factor it into my calculations, but I’ll not indulge your emotions or need for reparations.’

'Is that why you think I ask?'

'Isn't it?'

Magnus grinned. ***'Maybe a little.'***

Two days after coming for her in the refugee camps, Hassan brought Alivia to an old candlelit gallery within a drum tower high on the outskirts of the Hegemon, where the thunder of war and booms of ongoing engagements were subdued.

An isolated place, it had the look of a chapel, deep with memory and old prayers. Alivia felt cold, as if something terrible had once happened here, and its echo had seeped into the rough, bas-relief carved walls, never to be forgotten. A long wooden table, unevenly stained with lacquer, ran the length of the gallery, carved from a single, massive slab of dark wood.

'Please sit,' said Hassan, pulling a chair out for her.

Alivia took a seat and rested her palms flat on the table. The wood was smooth, the sweep of the grain comfortingly natural. Hassan left through the door by which they had entered, and was it just her imagination or did she see a look of pity in his eyes?

A dozen seats surrounded the table, but only half were occupied.

Three beings of mortal scale, three of transhuman proportions.

Malcador sat at the head of the table, looking as frail as any of the hollow-cheeked venerables wheezing out their last breaths in the camps. His robe of office hung loose on his frame of bones, and the fingers that held his eagle-topped staff reminded Alivia of ancient images of a deathly reaper clutching his scythe in a fleshless grip.

'Hello, Alivia,' he said, the strength of his voice giving the lie to his

appearance. But that was Malcador in a nutshell, lies wrapped in untruths and cloaked in falsehoods. 'I trust your family are well situated now?'

She nodded, but didn't answer. Instead, she studied the others around the table.

The three Astartes were clearly VI Legion, execution killers with ice-weathered skin, iron-braided beards and winter-blue warplate. They looked at her as a pack, wordlessly sharing how best to tear her apart.

Of all the loyalist Space Marines Alivia had met, she liked Space Wolves the least.

Malcador's two companions were unknown to her.

The first was a bronze-armoured woman… or at least Alivia assumed so. It was hard to be sure. Her armoured hands tapped restlessly on the table, and whether it was a trick of the candlelight or the play of shadows around her masked face, Alivia couldn't bring her features into focus, as though her eyes refused to linger and kept sliding clear.

One of the Soulless Sisterhood…

Alivia signed a question, her fingers slow as she struggled to remember the silent speech.

The woman seemed taken aback to have been addressed, but she soon overcame her surprise to sign an answer.

Vigil Sister Challis Vedia.

Across from Vedia was an unremarkable man garbed in the traditional flowing robes of Afrique. His skin was dark but ashen, and his eyes spoke of suffering and guilt still simmering within: dangerous emotions that could easily tip to vengeance. His left arm was a prosthetic, high-end augmetic work with a glossy black sheen.

'And you? Who are you?' she asked.

The man's eyes darted to Malcador, who gave a soft nod of assent.

'My name is Promeus.'

Alivia's eyes narrowed. 'But that's not the one your mother gave you, is it?

Let's not start out on a lie, shall we?'

He met her gaze and said, 'My given name was Lemuel Gaumon. I took this name to honour a fallen warrior of the Emperor.'

She saw the bristling of the Space Marines at *that* remark.

'Why are they here?' she asked him. 'The vox-casters tell us the warriors of Fenris are racing to reach Terra. Are they already here?'

'This is the watch pack of Bödvar Bjarki,' said Promeus.

'I can speak for myself, *wyrd-wraith*,' said the warrior who was obviously their leader, a giant with a tattooed face and fetish-hung armour. Even through his beard, Alivia could see candlelight gleaming on the edges of his fangs.

This one has power.

'I am Bödvar Bjarki of the Rout, Rune Priest of Tra,' said the bearded warrior.

He slapped a meaty palm on the shoulder of the warrior to his right, a long-limbed brute whose skull was a nightmare of plated bronze and burn scars. One eye was a blue-glowing augmetic, the other milky and off-centre, as if it had melted back across his face.

'This is Svafnir Rackwulf, Woe-maker of Tra,' said Bjarki.

'Greatest harpoon-caster of the Varangai,' said Rackwulf, his words slurred and wet sounding, 'and slayer of traitors.'

Alivia didn't like the emphasis he placed on *traitors*, or the way his grip tightened on the long spear he held. Half its length was toothed in bone barbs, and despite the ruination of his eye, Alivia didn't doubt he was as accurate with it as he had ever been. Its black haft seemed to soak up the light, and Alivia felt an instinctive dislike of it.

A null-weapon then…

‘And this,’ said Bjarki with a bark of amusement, ‘is Olgyr Widdowsyn of Balt. He is our shield bearer and nursemaid when we are sick.’

‘Ach,’ said Widdowsyn, a hulking warrior with the face of a brawler encased in armour that seemed altogether too small for his Astartes bulk. ‘I set one broken bone and suddenly I am Apothecary.’

Alivia ignored their banter, knowing it was simply an act, a way to get her to lower her expectations of their cunning, to underestimate them. She had met Wolves before, and would never make that mistake again.

‘He called you a watch pack,’ said Alivia. ‘So what do you watch for?’

‘ *Maleficarum*,’ spat Bjarki. ‘We watch for treachery at the highest level.

Our packs stood as loyal bodyguards to the Allfather’s sons, and if it was their wyrd to become oath-breakers we were also to serve as their executioners.’

Alivia laughed. ‘Really? I can imagine how well *that* went down with the primarchs.’

‘You can imagine how little the Rout cares about that.’

Alivia looked back at the door and said, ‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed the fighting outside, but it doesn’t look like your packs did a very good job.’

Fangs were bared and Alivia felt the air in the room thicken with a hot, animal stink. Both Vedia and Promeus recoiled from it, but Alivia had stared into the murderous eyes of the primarch Horus, so their predator musk held no fear for her.

‘And you?’ said Bjarki, leaning in and resting his elbows on the table, addressing the question to Malcador as much as her. ‘Who are *you*?’

‘Me? I’m Alivia Sureka. I’m nobody, and I have no idea why I’m here.’

Bjarki laughed again and wagged an admonishing finger.

‘ *Fenrys hjolda!* A woman whose wyrd is woven with more threads than the ropes binding the great sails of the Allfather’s dragonship says she is nobody! Now who is lying? Your thread is so long it stretches back into darkness like an anchor into the deepest ocean chasm, but know this, Mistress Sureka, I fear it nears its end.’

‘If you only knew how many times I’ve wished that were true,’ she said, turning back to Malcador. The old man was a shadow of his former self, but Alivia knew better than to take anything he presented to the world at face value. The Sigillite was the very epitome of the first warmaster’s words.

When you are strong, appear weak.

But even as the thought came to her, something told her that perhaps here, at the end, *this* was the real face of Malcador. For all his glamour, deceits and stratagems, this was who he truly was: an old man with nothing left to give.

‘What say you, Sigillite?’ said Bjarki. ‘We brought you Promeus and his knowledge of the Crimson King’s quest. The time of the watch packs is done. Release us from our oaths and give us leave to join our brothers on the walls.’

‘Not yet,’ said Malcador.

Bjarki stabbed an accusing finger vaguely in the direction of Vedia and said, ‘Then tell me why we meet in this place of secrets with one who blinds me to the wyrd?’

Malcador nodded and said, ‘I have one last task I require of you.’

Alivia rapped her knuckles on the table and shook her head. ‘And there it is. There’s always *just one more task*. It never ends until you turn your back

on him and walk away.’

‘Yet here you are, Alivia,’ said Malcador. ‘Every step you took on the road away from Terra has led you back here. This is where you were meant to be. You know *He* needs you, but I need you most of all.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I need you to save the Emperor.’

Alivia wanted to laugh, but saw Malcador was deadly serious.

‘I know it’s been a while since I’ve set foot on Terra, so maybe things have changed some, but… isn’t that the job of the Custodians?’ said Alivia.

‘They would never agree to what I am about to ask of you,’ said Malcador.

‘Hence the presence of Mistress Vedia. Constantin and his Custodians cannot know what is planned or they would execute us all, even me.’

The Silent Sister’s fingers moved in a blur of frustration.

Secrets and lies are what brought us to this moment.

Malcador at least had the decency to look ashamed.

‘We all must bear our burdens, Sister, but know that His is the greatest of all,’ said Malcador. ‘And the words I will speak come directly from Him.’

‘How are we few to save the Allfather?’ said Bjarki.

Malcador traced an ever-shrinking figure of eight on the tabletop.

‘You have all seen beyond the walls and know the host we face,’ he said.

‘Deep down, you all acknowledge the inescapable truth that we cannot win this fight. Horus has a virtually endless supply of troops and war machines he can throw at us, where our resources deplete every day. The numbers do not lie – we cannot hold with the forces we have left. It may take weeks or even months, but Terra *will* fall.’

Such a defeatist pronouncement, so baldly made, shocked them all, even the Astartes.

‘Guilliman and the Lion will be here any day,’ managed Promeus. ‘That’s what the vox-clarions keep telling us. Is that a… *lie*? Are we alone…?’

‘We believe they are fighting to reach us, yes, but they will not arrive in time to save us. If things continue as they are, any relief force will reach Terra only to find Horus the master of our ashes and bones.’

Malcador paused and drew a reluctant breath. ‘But the fates have seen fit to offer one chance, the merest sliver of one to be sure, but a chance nonetheless.’

‘A chance for what?’ asked Alivia, fearful of the answer.

‘To deprive the enemy of one of their most potent weapons.’

‘And how will we do that?’ asked Alivia.

‘With redemption,’ said Malcador. ‘And forgiveness.’

Before Alivia could ask any more, Promeus let out a gasp of pain, leaning over the table and clutching his chest as if he were having a heart attack.

His already pallid features turned ashen, his eyes saucer-wide with fear.

‘He’s here,’ said Promeus. ‘I can feel him…’

‘Who’s here?’ said Alivia.

‘ *Him!* ’ cried Promeus. ‘Oh, Throne, I feel the scars of his fury inside me still!’

Blood filled Promeus’ left eye, and red tears spilled out to run down his cheek.

‘ *Who?* ’ demanded Alivia.

‘The Crimson King!’ screamed Promeus. ‘He’s here!’

BOOK TWO

WESTERN HEMISPHERIC

FIVE

Opportunities Multiply

The assault on Western Hemispheric began with a bombardment.

In previous epochs, it would have been recorded by historians as something monumental: the largest deployment of heavy siege guns in history; the most explosive force brought to bear in one battle; the most concentrated area of shelling ever seen.

In truth, it was one of the smaller artillery duels of the day.

The heaviest guns, mounted on fixed rails and crewed by gibbering, glass-eyed giants, hurled penetrator warheads from smoke-filled revetments as mobile howitzer batteries advanced down zigzagging trenches the size of deep-ocean canyons. Hundreds of multi-launchers streaked a thousand missiles into the sky every second.

Vast bombards advanced behind crawling behemoths fitted with angled glacis, lobbing titanic spheres laden with volatile fuel-air explosives.

Phosphex missiles and napthek shells seared the ground to glass and set the Imperial outworks aflame. Withering streams of gunfire flared, lashing the ramparts and outer bulwarks in streams of high-velocity steel and las.

Smoke and fumes thickened the air, the thunder of detonations and launches almost impossible to separate. The screams of the dying went unheard as the earth shook with the violence of its pummelling.

The Imperial counter-battery fire was no less ferocious.

With their guns ranged, kill-zones marked and the artillerymen drilled to the highest level, return fire punished the traitors for every metre they advanced. Mine launchers seeded the ground with melta charges before the advancing mantlet screens, and deadly accurate plunging fire turned the canyon trenches into charnel houses of burning fuel and seared flesh.

Secondary detonations split the trenches open and laid them bare to enfilading fire. Mangled bodies choked their width, and shredded walls of flesh offered literal meat shields to cover later marching detachments.

Rogal Dorn's masterful placement of outflung redoubts, ravelins and hornworks gave no place for the attackers to advance in cover. Merciless grazing fire sawed through the ranks of traitors massing behind the towering barriers protecting the artillery. Advances faltered as the front lines spasmed with casualties, then pushed onward as whip-masters and braying war-horns drove the host towards the walls.

Masked soldiers bearing profane banners were scythed down by airbursting shells that flensed their ranks with white-hot steel. Entire regiments were obliterated in the blink of an eye, wholesale slaughters ignored as following troops marched over the smashed bones and torn meat of their fellows.

Cohorts of screeching Knights strode through the host, bounding between ruins and unleashing torrents of fire with each step. Behind them, smoke-shrouded Reavers of Magna, and a rogue Warlord of Tempestus, stalked like apex predators awaiting the soft underbelly of the enemy to be exposed before striking.

Pain-maddened abhumans charged the outermost redoubts, scrambling through mined ditches, and up near-vertical walls. They were bestial things with branded fur and curling horns sheathed in brass. Murderous gunfire flayed them from every side, and only a handful survived to reach the ramparts, but that was often enough to rip through its defenders.

As each redoubt was abandoned or taken by storm, its open rear gave no succour to the enemy. Overwatching gunners in revetted bunkers and gun-boxes flayed the beasts with bracketed fire, and when they were dead, fresh Imperial detachments pushed out to take their position on the blood-slick walls.

Squadrons of traitor armour attempted to push forward through the smoking ruins, but were quickly bogged down in the mud. The vehicles'

crews fought to free them as hounding fire blazed from sponsons and screaming turrets as yet more artillery was brought to bear. Little by little, the space between the two opposing forces shrank, a death zone where nothing could lift its head without being cut down.

The carnage was inhuman, thousands of lives spent with no thought for the price of blood being paid every second. Besieging a heavily defended emplacement was the most brutal and uncaring of war's many incarnations, and this was its most extreme manifestation. The bloody arithmetic of combat was unflinching, and every advantage a defender might muster was being brought to bear to deny, delay and destroy the enemy approach.

But it wouldn't be enough, it could *never* be enough.

Rogal Dorn's initial calculations had been made with estimated projections of enemy numbers that were woefully conservative, and assumed breaking points of courage. But every variable in these equations was rendered null and void by a zealous fury no Imperial planner could have foreseen, a level of insanity beyond comprehension.

It drove the attackers into the teeth of the Imperial guns without thought for their survival.

It showed they were more afraid of their masters than the enemy.

But even had the Praetorian of Terra accepted the most outlandish estimates of the enemy soldiers' capability and resolve in the face of almost certain death, there was one variable neither he nor his command staff could possibly have accounted for.

The warlocks of the Thousand Sons.

It felt like their wars of old.

Fellowships working together, their powers alloyed to one purpose.

Ahriman's Scarab elite followed in the wake of rainbow-hued monsters with matted fur and forking horns that sparked with corposant. Pyrae cultists ignited the hanging veils of fyceline-laced air, and adepts of the Raptora swept it forwards in blazing curtains of dancing fire.

Athanaeans reached into the aether to twist the perceptions of the men and women on the wall who beheld this sight, rendering the flames into howling maws that screamed horrors unique to every mind.

Such was the volume of destruction, the most colossally heavy transports were forced to lead the way. Leviathans and profaned Capitol Imperialis flattened what weeks of artillery bombardment had not, crushing the titanic remains of shell-smashed ruins for smaller transports to follow.

Keeping low to the ground, Ahriman led his fellowship through the three-

metre-deep trenches of crushed rock carved by the grinding tracks of *Khasisatra*, a Monolith-class Capitol Imperialis, as it ground its way towards the Palace walls.

Battle cannons blazed from its topside and every twenty-seven minutes its axial-mounted macro cannon would fire. When it did, every mortal warrior within five hundred metres needed to turn away, cover their ears and open their mouth to keep the shock pulse of its firing from collapsing their lungs and pulping their internal organs.

Las-fire zipped overhead, as dust and rock fragments drizzled into the trench.

Strobing shadows stretched and swelled, retreated and danced around the fires overhead. The greasy taste of rancid fat and the scratching pressure on his aetheric senses told Ahriman that not all such shadows were natural.

The crackling golden light he and Magnus had seen when flying the Great Ocean was still there, so very faint, and so very fragile. Ahriman didn't dare linger on it, for fear that acknowledging it in this realm of the mundane would alert the defenders to its presence.

It felt like an itch he couldn't scratch, a presence that was only perceptible by *not* seeking it out. But it was there and could yet be prised open.

The endless tide of Neverborn can sense it too…

Samus, Oholoxene, Vhargal, Cor'bax, Ur-nephre, and unnumbered more.

So many names, so many secrets to pull from their immortal minds.

He could feel them scratching at the walls of reality, frenzied and maddened by the bloodshed engulfing the Throneworld. The veil was pierced in thousands of places, allowing the daemons to vomit onto the surface of the world in unthinking murder-packs of claw and fang. But here, this close to the telaethesic shield, they were yet barred from the inner precincts of the Palace.

Nothing truly daemonic could manifest within that psychic umbra.

But the pressure was building, and soon the Emperor's shield would shatter.

'You know what this reminds me of?' said Ahriman, turning to look over his shoulder at the flattened ground behind the advancing leviathans. A hundred legionaries followed him down the gouged trench, together with five thousand mortal soldiers in ochre and black bearing scale-hooks and rotor-ladders.

Every one of the scores of giant vehicles boasted similar entourages.

'I don't,' replied Atrahasis, his new equerry. 'I'm not Athanaean.'

Atrahasis was an adept of the Raptora with all the blunt directness of that Fellowship.

The pearlescent red and ivory of the warrior's armour gleamed, not a single mote of dust or smoke besmirching its burnished plate. The perfection of its form put Ahriman in mind of Hathor Maat, and his former brother's face flashed before his eyes.

He pushed the memory of the fallen Pavoni adept from his mind.

No, not fallen. Sacrificed. By my hand.

'So what does it remind you of?' said Atrahasis when Ahriman did not continue.

'Ullanor,' said Ahriman at last. 'When the geoformer fleets levelled an entire continent for one man's vanity. We were told it was to honour us, but really it was for Him, a narcissistic salve to His ego, to know that so many were His to command.'

'That was when He stepped away from the crusade,' pointed out Atrahasis.

'He passed command of His hosts to the Warmaster.'

'Because the work of the crusade had become tedious to Him,' said Ahriman. 'The glory days of its early decades were long passed, all that remained was the final grind to the end. *That* was why He stepped away.

Horus' elevation was symbolic, nothing more. The Emperor was done with us, and sought only to return to His latest endeavour.'

A thunder of sirens blared from *Khasisatra*'s topside and a rising pressure of internal fury built deep within its armoured hull. The enormous war engine's void shields crackled as its projector vanes retracted, and the blast shutters descended.

Bracing pinions slammed down by its towering wheels as the macro cannon powered up.

+Kneel,+ ordered Ahriman, sending his command psychically. +And brace.+

He went to the ground as the smoke and fog wreathing the upper reaches of Western Hemispheric parted for an instant, revealing saw-toothed ramparts flickering with muzzle flare and detonations. Streaking arcs of petrary shells exploded above them, most detonating against the aegis or blasted from the air by the wall's close-in defence turrets. Some struck home and liquefied the parapet with flame, sending cascades of rubble and bodies down its cliff-high slopes.

Ahriman watched the play of light, beautiful in its own way, seeing patterns and meaning in its interactions. The breath quickened in his throat, his heart pounded, as the vision stuttering together in his mind was one he knew he was not seeing with his eyes.

This was the blessing and curse of the Corvidae – to see portents in everything, to hear the echoes of the future and feel the emotion of their passing before their time. An aetheric knife to the heart made him look up in sudden apprehension as he heard a sound like a whipcrack of lightning.

He tasted the volcanic heat of an open blast furnace, the scream of tortured metal, the thunder of an earthquake. An overwhelming pressure on his senses, like an oncoming storm.

+Up!+ he cried. +Everyone out the trench! Go!+

The Thousand Sons following him obeyed instantly, powering up the rocky slopes of the trench or punching through its ruined sections where the cratered ground overlapped its length. The mortal soldiers behind them watched in confusion, not understanding what was happening.

Ahriman climbed the trench wall and vaulted over its lip. He rolled to his knees and ran through the razed ruins of the Palace, glancing over his shoulder just before he heard the distinct hard crack of wall-mounted defence lasers.

Like molten rods of glass blinking into existence for a trillionth of a second, the concentrated fire of three defence lasers punched through the frontal armour of *Khasisatra.* Its shuttered magazine bays were open, its main gun was primed, and the Capitol Imperialis was as devastatingly vulnerable as it was possible to be.

The seams of its heavy armour plates blazed with phosphor-bright illumination. Spears of white-hot fire lanced through its vents, vision blocks and the joints of its weapon ports.

For the briefest moment, the Capitol Imperialis seemed to swell as if inflating.

And then it froze.

Ahriman skidded behind a fragmentary nub of stonework, the remains of a fluted column, its Doric base miraculously untouched by the shelling. The sound of artillery dropped away, the sudden silence shocking after living with the endless cacophony of battle for so long.

He knew what he was seeing was impossible.

A detonation frozen in time.

He felt the certainty of his prescient vision unravel within him, the heat and fire and light of the inevitable explosion he'd seen and felt like a ghost in his mind.

+Look!+ cried Atrahasis, the blunt force of his communication making Ahriman wince.

He followed his equerry's warning and looked up to see the tar-black clouds above *Khasisatra* writhing as though stirred by an unseen hand.

Constant lightning burst from the epicentre of the dark maelstrom, reaching down with forking hands to envelop the Capitol Imperialis in a web of crackling lines of power.

Icy blue light burned through the heart of the storm, a pinprick at first then bursting open the clouds like a wound in the sky. A figure emerged from the light, golden and crimson, beatific and terrible. Too raw and beautiful to look upon directly.

+Sire…+ breathed Ahriman.

Magnus descended from the heart of the swirling light and smoke, his skin burning with the magnitude of his powers, his eye filled with warp light.

One hand was aimed at the Palace wall, the other ablaze with the source of the lightning.

He clenched his lightning-wreathed fist and lifted his arm.

And *Khasisatra* lifted with it.

Rock and mud and dust spilled from its tracks as all sixty-seven thousand tonnes of its mass lifted into the air. Howls and cheers rose from the ruins as the titanic vehicle rose higher. Blinding veins of light traced eager paths over Magnus' flesh as he rose skyward, dragging the seething bulk of the *Khasisatra* with him. Motes of ash peeled from him.

A storm of light from the Palace reached out to Magnus, the Imperial gunners understanding that a target of incalculable worth had just presented itself. Laser and shell bursts exploded around the primarch, but the lightning surrounding him was proof against all attacks.

With a roar, Magnus wrenched his fist around, and the enormous vehicle swung up through the air as though launched from a trebuchet. Ahriman watched in disbelief as the doomed *Khasisatra* flew towards the Palace, still wreathed in a web of lightning at the frozen nanosecond of its destruction.

Defensive gunfire flashed, but none of the weapons that could react fast enough could stop something of such inconceivably colossal mass.

It arced down to the wall in agonisingly slow motion, and the instant it struck the upper reaches of Western Hemispheric, Magnus released his hold on the flow of time surrounding its immensity.

Ahriman turned away as the Capitol Imperialis detonated with the power of an exploding star.

Its reactor and all the city-levelling ordnance it carried was equal to the force of a dozen battlefield atomics, and the searing flash of its detonation momentarily dispelled the constant twilight of the siege. A fraction of a

second later, the building rumble of the explosion raced out from the walls, a roar that was deafening, even over the already apocalyptic battle.

Ahriman's auto-senses shut him off from the outside world, but the sound within his helm was still like a Dreadnought's siege hammer pounding on his skull. Moments later, the force of the blast wave rocked him sprawling.

Scalding smoke billowed around the Thousand Sons in a lethal, superheated fog, and Ahriman felt it even through the ceramite of his warplate. The earth shook as though trying to dislodge the puny mortals crawling upon its surface, as the overpressure rolled outwards in dynamic storms of hurricane-force winds that hurled debris and loose stone back to the traitor camps.

Warning sigils flashed onto his visor: lethal spikes of ionising radiation, e-mag pulses and deadly heat. Seconds later the secondary flash of the explosion lit up the sky and threw out long, stark shadows in a world turned a brilliant, bleached white by the blast.

As the eye-burning light faded, Ahriman rolled onto his front to see a towering mushroom cloud of roiling, superheated smoke climbing and spreading from the section of Western Hemispheric directly before him.

Or, rather, what remained of it.

An entire section of the wall and its defensive outworks had simply vanished, vaporised in the nuclear fire of the initial blast or flattened by the force of the shock wave. As if a vast beast had reached down from the sky to bite a V-shaped segment from the wall, an immense, sloping breach had just opened up in the Palace defences.

Finally daring to open up his aetheric senses, Ahriman rose through his

psychic mantras to the ninth enumeration. The chattering of Never born hunger rose to an unending, bestial howl and shimmering auras lifted off every living being around him. Fierce blues, golds and greens from the Thousand Sons, bleeding reds and oranges from the burned and blinded mortals staggering in mute agony behind him.

There!

The frozen golden light of the Emperor's presence was bright and golden in his mind. It felt brighter than before, as if an all-but-invisible crack had been forced fractionally wider.

+Up!+ pulsed Ahriman. +Forward!+

Abidemi sat above the right sponson of the Sicaran Venator battle tank as it roared past the Dome of Illumination at speed. The Venator was among the fastest tanks in the Imperial inventory, and Zytos had brooked no argument from its bewildered crew when he had commandeered it. The Sanctum Imperialis was roughly eight hundred kilometres in diameter, and Abidemi knew they must make that crossing with all possible speed. Gargo was pushing it hard, and if the vehicle lasted long enough to reach Western Hemispheric, it would likely never move again under its own power.

Zytos sat across from him above the opposite gun, while Igen Gargo looked out of the driver's hatch, scanning the ground ahead. The air around the Venator tasted like tin, the actinic reek of its overworked plasma ioniser drive core causing Abidemi's visor to glitch and fizz with static bleed.

He tilted his head to the side and hammered the palm of his gauntlet against his helmet. The static eventually cleared and he looked over with great sadness into the vast space encompassed by the Dome of Illumination.

Dark deeds had transpired here; traitors had set foot beneath its hallowed canopy, and brother legionaries had died. The kilometre-wide dome was askew now, and the water that once poured from its upper reaches had been diverted from the basin below to hardened cisterns deep beneath the Palace's bedrock. The three squatting colossi supporting the dome's vast weight were blackened by fire, their limbs gouged by rogue shell impacts and air-bursting shrapnel that had r icocheted in beneath the aegis. The light coming through the wide eye at its centre and holes punched by shell impacts swam with motes of dust and ash trapped beneath by vortices of tortured air.

'Good craft in those statues,' said Zytos, following Abidemi's gaze to study the dome's smoke-stained underside. 'Even scarred and off balance, they still perform their duty.'

‘As do we all,’ said Gargo, and Zytos gave a wry nod.

Abidemi saw the symbolism too, and drew strength from it as he turned to look back the way they had come. Mottled clouds of purple and red hung over Indomitor, some five hundred kilometres behind them to the east. The fighting still raged at their old station, as it did all around the circuit of the Eternity Wall.

Zytos had tasked the soldiers of *Vulkan’s Own* with the defence of the wall, and its ad hoc command staff had sworn solemn oaths to give their lives in its defence when it became clear they could no longer fight alongside the Salamanders. These were men and women without regiments, without banners, but they had come together in the face of the enemy, and would do honour to their adopted name.

The paths around the dome were broken, demolished by explosives by the looks of the burn-scars and shrapnel wounds in the surrounding rock, so Gargo took a looping route past the grand, high-walled estates of the Viridarium Nobiles.

The precincts of the Sanctum Imperialis were thronged with refugees: tens of thousands of dusty, tired and exhausted people. They spilled from the overcrowded camps filling its wide thoroughfares and processional boulevards, taking shelter from the gently falling ash and caustic rain beneath awnings of canvas and tarpaulin. The dispossessed of Terra huddled against the walls of palaces of governance and grand temples to bureaucracy like drifts of snow. They looked up as the smoking battle tank passed, moving from its path in fear.

Fighting vehicles meant danger, no matter which banner flew from their vox-masts.

The roads here were not designed to bear the weight of tanks, and Abidemi’s heart was heavy as they rode roughshod over the Palace’s gilded streets. The hand-carved cobbles, each bearing a master’s mark, were ripped up by the passage of the armoured tracks and scattered in their wake like clinker from a forge.

Zytos saw Abidemi's concern and said, 'I wonder if this was how Lord Dorn felt as he peeled back the beauty of his father's Palace and sheathed it

in ugly plates of armour.'

'His warriors claim he has promised to rebuild the Palace, to restore every wall, tower and gate to its former glory,' said Gargo.

'He can try,' said Zytos, shaking his head, 'but any craftsman worthy of the name knows that once you break something of beauty it's never the same.'

'Sometimes it can be better,' said Abidemi. 'The artisans of Clymene hold to the aesthetic that beauty is sometimes derived from the imperfect, the impermanent and the incomplete.'

'I know of it,' said Zytos. 'I spent two years sweating in the forge of Master Koren and arguing against his ideas of "nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect" but it seems as apt a fit as any philosophy these days.'

'Perhaps,' said Abidemi, and they rounded the perimeter of the dome and connected with the Via Martial that led to the House of Weapons. Two hundred kilometres to the south-west, it was possible to see the rearing cliff that was the noble bulwark of Adamant and Western Hemispheric. A bombardment was underway, the horizon afire with impacts and aegis flare.

'This is a bad one,' said Zytos. 'Yes, a bad one indeed.'

'One section of wall under assault looks much like another from this distance,' said Gargo to Abidemi. 'Are you sure this is where your vision leads us?'

Abidemi was about to reply when the sky lit with the fury of an atomic explosion.

This far from the detonation, the blast was a groaning rumble of deep movement within the earth, but it soon swelled to the throaty roar of a drake in heat. A mushrooming storm cloud of pyroclastic fire reared up from the wall, and Abidemi remembered the ash column of Mount Deathfire on the day the primarch had been returned to them.

‘I am sure,’ he said.

SIX

The Breach

All was fire and smoke and dust.

The ground before Western Hemispheric was a smoking nightmare of utter destruction. Superheated ash clouds twisted like living things over the molten rock and burning ruins, hungry to devour whatever combustible material hadn’t already been consumed by *Khasisatra*’s detonation.

Ahriman’s armour glowed with heat, and he felt his skin crisping through the layered ceramite with every ponderous step he took. The ground underfoot would burn with radiation for thousands of years, and skeletal figures crumbled beneath his tread. His body felt as though it were being slowly cooked within his plate, like the rivers of sweat running from his flesh were runnels of fat coming off sizzling meat.

He bent low to push through the violent thermals surging in random vortices. He lost track of time. Every step felt like a lifetime, his advance slow and purposeful and grimly inevitable.

Shrieking voices called from rad-squalls that danced in the firestorms raging throughout the blast zone. Some of them had faces and half-formed arms, creatures beyond the veil pushing into the material world.

Ahriman’s warplate struggled to make sense of the myriad inputs it was receiving. The e-mag pulse of the detonation sent crazed spikes of static through his visor, and heat bloom made thermal layers useless. He could see nothing but ghosts moving through the red-lit landscape – as sure a vision of hell as had ever been conjured in verse or dreamed of by madmen and artists.

His mundane senses were all but blind, so he relied on his other gifts.

A glimmering figure of fire approached through the smoke.

Its aura told him it was Atrahasis, his equerry staggering through the storm of ash and rock. Debris parted before him, shunted from his path by a kine layer of pure force.

The vox crackled, but whatever had been said was lost in the howl of e-mag interference.

+Speak with your mind,+ sent Ahriman.

Atrahasis nodded. +One hundred and seventy-one of us remain in this thrust. The thousands of mortals who began this march with us are already dead or will be dying in agony within a matter of hours. Only legionaries remain.+

+Good,+ said Ahriman.

+Good?+

+No mortal soldiers will be left alive on the wall. We strike hard for the breach. This is Astartes war now.+

Atrahasis nodded. +As it was always meant to be.+

Ahriman focused his senses and sent out a pulse of psychic energy.

+Fifteenth Legion! Rise to the second enumeration. Pavoni, dampen the radiation, Raptora, push a kine barrier before us.+

Ahriman turned on the spot as shimmering slicks of light resolved into focus around him, gods of battle wreathed in golden radiance. Two hundred warriors of the Thousand Sons had followed him into the fire, and he felt the presence of hundreds more.

Amon’s warriors to the left, Menkaura’s to the right, but so power ful was the telaethesic ward that he could barely sense them at all.

Have we changed so much that it blunts our aetheric powers as well as the daemonic?

The only constant in the firestorm of lethal ash, strobing flashes of secondary detonations and choking smoke was the Crimson King. The primarch burned like a bloated red sun in its last moments, bathing the shattered ruins of Terra in a hellish, bloodstained light.

+Follow the primarch,+ he said. +He is our lodestar. He leads us to victory!+

Ahriman turned and pushed onward into the teeth of the storm like every infantryman who had ever marched through mud, snow or heat to cross the

last hundred metres to close with the enemy and destroy them. Their pace was glacial, but it hardly mattered any more.

No one remained on the wall to oppose them.

The psychic barrier of the Raptora ploughed the air, pushing the ash and smoke around them to reveal the vitrified ruin of the landscape. The outworks before Western Hemispheric had been utterly flattened by the blast wave, only the stubs of foundations and waving tangles of rebar indicating where they had once stood.

A pack of hulking Castellax battle cybernetics lumbered through the smoke, but so burned were their outer carapaces that Ahriman could not tell to which side they belonged, nor how they had come to be so far out from the walls. He felt the pain of their tortured psyches hardwired to their biomechanical cortexes, enslaved souls screaming in pain-filled madness.

Whatever surveyor gear was left to them screeched as it detected them, and the machines lashed out with insensate fury. Their gunfire was wild and inaccurate, and kine shields deflected any shots that came too close, but the hyper-aggressive machine-spirits within them now had purpose, and thus were dangerous.

+Yoke their souls,+ ordered Ahriman. +And bring them.+

Threads of witchfire reached out to the robots as the Athanaeans stabbed their power into the broken minds of the cybernetics. Some were too lost to madness, and those pitiful few were destroyed by their fellows in a merciless display of decimation.

The gunfire ceased, and the robots fell in with the Thousand Sons'

advance.

Like all simple-minded things, they *craved* the comfort of obedience.

They're not Castellax-Achea, but they'll do.

Ahriman saw the wreckage of armoured vehicles amid the flames, some Imperial, some from Perturabo's host. Mostly Army, some Legion, and others that were the strange hybrid things of the Mechanicum forces loyal to the Warmaster. Fires burned in their hollowed-out guts, and cinder-black bodies hung from broken hatches as stalk-limbed machines twitched in their death throes.

Trapped machine-spirits begged for release or whispered dark promises in return for the loan of their wrath. Ahriman knew better than to trust such damaged things, and he left them to burn in the fires. A few lone vehicles had survived the initial blast and ridden out the shock wave. These now prowled the wreckage, but they were few and far between and wandered the ruins like blind men.

The smoke was thinning now. The fires at the site of the explosion were being drawn upwards and spreading in a wide umbra like a fresh layer of tar painting the sky. It was testament to Dorn's skill that much of the soaring wall and its many guntowers remained standing, though its cladding of adamantium, steel and stone had been pared away. Only the bare rock of the original wall remained, and a portion of that was a vitrified gap, like a missing tooth in a gum line.

Smoking debris and rubble formed a ready-made ramp to the crest of the breach. The sheer scale of the wall's height and its clifflike nature still rendered it a formidable barrier, but without its flanking outworks and enfilading ravelins, the wall was – for now – wide open.

+Send in the automata first,+ ordered Ahriman, and immediately the lumbering Castellax began climbing the slope, iron limbs and servo-assisted muscles driving them up faster than any mortal.

Maybe this will work better than we dared hope.

+Raptora!+ sent Ahriman. +Discs!+

In the wake of the detonation, Imperial Fists under Captain Iacono redeployed to Hemispheric Nine, two thousand gold-clad warriors held in reserve to blunt any breakthrough. They disembarked from Rhinos, Tauroxes and heavy-duty cargo flatbeds, quickly forming up by squads and rushing to the walls.

The muster points behind the walls were charnel houses of burned bodies, rubble and screams. Irradiated lumps of rockcrete were strewn around, the adamantium rebar still glowing orange and as flexible as wire. Shielded pioneer crews were already on-site, spraying the wreckage with retardant foam to dampen the rad-levels, though extended exposure to the radiation soaking Hemispheric Nine's rock would be lethal to unaugmented humans for at least three years.

Scattered bands of Blood Angels commanded by Captain Tamaya added their weight to the Imperial Fists' attempt to seal the breach, some three hundred of Baal's finest.

After Saturnine, Lord Dorn had reappraised every aspect of his defence

plan, declared no detail, however slight, sacrosanct and directed his chief aides to find fault with his preparations. Little was uncovered the Praetorian had not already conceived, but no one had attributed any especial strategic significance to Hemispheric Nine beyond the obvious.

Now word that one of the Emperor's fallen sons had revealed his presence in the attack had changed that, especially given that primarch was said to be Magnus the Cyclops. His intellect was prodigious, his mind working on levels beyond the understanding of mere mortals. If Magnus was taking part in this attack, then clearly Hemispheric Nine held significance beyond what any Imperial planner had seen.

Thousands more Space Marines were being drawn from positions all along the Eternity Wall to reinforce Hemispheric Nine. The speed of the Imperial response was dazzling. Moving soldiers from pre-prepared defensive positions and redeploying them was no small task, requiring hundreds of

orders, confirmations, logistical support and coordination, as well as the one thing in shortest supply at such pivotal moments.

Time.

It took seventy-six minutes for the first Imperial Fists to arrive at Hemispheric Nine, eighty-one for the Blood Angels. Thankfully, the ferocity of the explosion had delayed the traitors from exploiting the breach as quickly as they might otherwise have done, and the first warriors of the Legiones Astartes to arrive were not of the Legion of Magnus.

Nor were they Imperial Fists or Blood Angels.

They were Salamanders.

The Time of Trial.

Abidemi stood in the breach, looking out over a vision of Terra that more closely resembled Nocturne in its violent seasonal seizure. The surface of the Throneworld ran with living fire and raging pyro-storms devoured anything combustible as far as the eye could see.

Gales of radiation-laced wind howled over the walls as though Terra itself were screaming. Bent against their burning force, Gargo and Zytos heaped rubble into a makeshift barrier of interlocking debris and shattered rockcrete.

It wasn't the Barbican of Themis, but it would do for now.

'Hurry,' said Abidemi, spying a brilliant figure drifting in the storms

raging over the battlefield, a demigod haloed by the light of a dying sun.

'The crimson drake nears.'

Numeon had spoken of how Magnus had appeared before him in the warp during their journey to bring Vulkan back to Nocturne. His lost brother had spoken of a primarch, mighty in his own way and deserving of respect, but also somehow… *diminished*.

Abidemi saw none of that here.

Magnus burned like a frozen explosion, a numinous being of radiant energy, his hair billowing around him like a bloody starburst, his armour dazzling in its brilliance. And his eye, *his eye*, burning with the light of impossible stars.

An angel in red and gold, to look upon him was like staring into the sun itself. His armour was brazen, his bearing majestic, and how Abidemi dearly wished things had been different, still feeling that unconscious, unbidden desire to drop to his knees before a primarch.

Magnus was wondrous, yes, but they all felt it: incredulity that a being who could trace his lineage from the Emperor Himself had now set himself to bloody purpose against them.

'Angron and Fulgrim are monsters,' said Abidemi, 'and their corruption is plain for all to see, but Magnus… He could yet fight by his father's side and not look out of place.'

'When was the moment?' Barek Zytos asked the distant figure of Magnus as he swung the enormous hammer to his shoulder. 'When did you first step from the light?'

'He'd likely not know himself,' said Abidemi, 'for nothing ever begins –

there is never just *one* root cause for anything, no singular deed or moment from which an act springs.'

'Why do you say that?' asked Gargo.

'The seeds of any outcome can always be traced back to some earlier moment, and to all those that preceded it. The further back we trace the path, the hazier the connections will become until the tiniest action might be said to have been the origin of any great event.'

'It doesn't matter how it happened,' said Zytos. 'Right now we have enemies to our front and no allies yet at our back.'

‘The Blood Angels and the Imperial Fists are en route,’ said Abidemi. ‘We only have to hold a short time.’

‘A short time feels like an eternity when awaiting reinforcements,’ said Zytos.

‘We are Salamanders,’ replied Abidemi as a ragged cohort of limping automata emerged from the fire and smoke of the breach. ‘Eternity is our watchword.’

At the sight of the Salamanders, the battle-automata howled with static-laced rage from skewed augmitters, their lolling, half-severed machine skulls flaring with target-locks.

‘Down,’ said Gargo as heavy shells chugged from smoking rotor cannons and corkscrewing rockets streaked from buckled launchers in fiery trails.

The impacts felt like a series of pounding hammer blows on the ground, but the shoulder-high wall Gargo and Zytos had constructed possessed a strength that belied its hasty construction. Its structure was layered and formed from the interlinked stones of Terra that took strength from their neighbour.

A rolling wall of flames billowed over its angled summit, but fire held no fear for Salamanders. They were born of fire and felt its burning kiss every day of their lives. Heavy shells chipped away at the stone, but the shots were wild and inaccurate.

‘The radiation is fouling their auspex,’ shouted Zytos over the barrage.

More rockets exploded overhead and scything fragments of red-hot steel rained down. The sound within Abidemi’s armour was like a bucket of smiter’s nails tipped onto a steel plate.

‘Give the word,’ he said to Gargo.

Gargo placed his hand flat on the ground, and the lenses of his helm dimmed as he read the currents of the earth. Even dulled through the millions of tonnes of metal and stone, he could sense Terra’s enemies approaching. Heavy footfalls rang out over rockcrete, and Abidemi’s grip tightened on *Draukoros*.

‘They’re right on top of us,’ he shouted.

‘Not yet,’ promised Gargo.

A grazing blast of solid slugs scythed the air above the wall as a trio of heavy blasts rocked Hemispheric Nine. Chips of stone lashed their armour and sizzling chunks of shrapnel pinged from the rocks in corkscrewing trails.

‘Now!’ shouted Gargo, and the three Salamanders rose from cover.

The battle-automata were right on top of them, eight within striking distance of their wall. Their armour was bare metal or black; impossible to tell from which maniple they had come. Behind them, the air shimmered with strangely lit fogs, through which flitting shapes darted between firespouts and the crump of secondary and tertiary detonations.

Zytos stepped up onto the chewed-up barrier of rocks and vaulted towards the nearest battle-automaton, a fire-blackened Castellan equipped with a heavy siege-fist and a rotor-barrelled autocannon.

‘In Vulkan’s name!’ he cried, swinging his hammer in a slaughterman’s arc.

The killing weight smashed the automaton’s already buckled cranial section to ruin. Its limbs folded and flames jetted from its split gorget as it crashed to the ground.

Zytos landed, keeping the hammer in motion and smashing the legs of the machine next to him. The cybernetic’s kneecap exploded into shattered fragments, tipping it back down the breach. Gunfire blazed from its weapons, tearing through the lighter backplate of a third automaton and shredding its internal mechanisms.

Gargo dived aside as a siege hammer slammed down on the wall, shattering their barricade to broken pieces. He rolled to his feet before the cybernetic and thrust his spear like a harpoon, driving it deep through a shattered access plate into its guts. He cranked the haft in a circle, drawing a machine shriek of pain from its augmitters before it dropped to its knees, locked in position like a supplicant in a fane.

Abidemi made a quarter-turn to the right and pulled *Draukoros* back as a cybernetic fired a chimeric bolter-assault cannon variant. Heavy shells thundered from the weapon, but its sights were misaligned and the mass-reactives blasted a half-metre gouge through the crest of the breach beside him.

He sprang forward, swaying aside as the machine brought its other arm down, one equipped with a colossal shot-cannon that drooled smoking oil-mix. *Draukoros* chopped through the barrels and the weapon exploded as shells thundered through it. The force of the explosion rocked the machine back on its heels and Abidemi thundered his boot into its chest.

It toppled backwards, the internal mechanisms that had kept it upright scrambled by the blast and the impact. Igen Gargo emptied his bolter into

the split carapace of another Castellan. Mass-reactives detonated in shuddering blasts within, and blue fire erupted from its vent-plates. Zytos slammed his hammer down on the chest of a kneeling robot, and sent it skidding back down the breach.

A burst of shells exploded next to Abidemi, and he threw himself to the side as a whipping coil of energy tore up the stone of the sundered wall. He rolled. The crackling lightning followed him and he grunted as it carved a blistering path across the chestplate of his armour. He felt the heat searing against the carapace beneath. An iron fist plucked him from the ground, and he grunted in pain as burning plates of ceramite were crushed against his chest.

The Castellan hauled him upright and he saw its head section had been split open, revealing a hideous mix of bio-organic machinery. Its torso was leaking flames and smoke, and a hideous screeching machine howl of pain blurted from a dangling augmitter.

The robot rocked back as flames washed over its carapace.

Knowing it was dying, the machine sought to exact its last revenge.

Abidemi felt his bones grind as its fist began to crush his chest.

He hacked *Draukoros* against the automaton's shoulder, but his pain and the angle of the blow robbed it of strength.

He heard the voices of his brothers, shouts of anger and warning.

Hard bangs of bolter fire, and flaming blasts of explosions bursting nearby.

A series of thumping detonations erupted farther down the slope of the breach, sending up fiery plumes of irradiated rock and toxic dust.

Even as the flames blurred in his vision, a piercing cold enveloped him, the sensation as sudden as if he had fallen through the ice of a frozen lake.

Dimly he recognised the distinctive double thump of Imperial artillery fire patterns, a strange, ululating howl. Gunship engines?

No, those are the howls of living beings.

The arm of the automaton glistened white, ice particles forming with ultra-rapidity. Abidemi brought *Draukoros* around in one final blow and hacked down on the machine's shoulder.

The metal shattered into frozen fragments and he fell to the crest of the breach, the ground now slick with frost and wet with pools of meltwater. A blizzard of icy needles swirled around him and ferocious winds doused the fires engulfing the remains of the ramparts.

Stalking shapes moved through the cold mist. Hunched and furred like hunters, they moved like feral beasts: hungry, and pitiless. They fell upon the wounded automaton in a flurry of blades, one gutting the machine with a wickedly toothed harpoon as another split it from gorget to belly with a looping axe blow.

A third warrior, armoured in ice grey and mantled in thick furs, slammed down his bone-coloured staff and the stone of the wall split apart as though an earthquake tore at the fortress walls. A wide trench ripped across the length of the breach, fully five metres deep and filled with razored spikes of hardened ice.

Satisfied with his work, he turned to Abidemi.

The warrior's bearded face was cracked and lined like old saddle leather, his beard braided with chips of glass and carved sigils. His eyes were hard flint, cold and sharp.

He had the face of a grinning killer, his teeth sharpened to razor fangs.

'I am Bjarki,' he said. 'This is Svafnir Rackwulf and Olgyr Widdow syn.

We kill sorcerers.'

'What?' said Abidemi. 'Sorcerers?'

'Them,' said Bjarki, pointing to shapes emerging from the glowing mist.

A host of red-armoured warriors of the Thousand Sons, mounted on shimmering discs of light, and led by a towering figure of fire and wrath.

'Magnus…' said Abidemi.

'Maleficarum,' growled Bjarki.

SEVEN

The Wolf and the Dragon

Seeing the red sorcerers sent a tremor of excitement along Bjarki's spine. It had been too long since he'd spilled the blood of his enemies. Though only three of the Rout stood before the Sons of Magnus, too many of his brothers had fallen to their malefic ways for him ever to fear them.

Not even the jagged memories of Nikaea or the newly inconstant path of his wyrd held any terror for him. Since Promeus had told him Magnus would return to the birthrock of humanity in search of his final soul-shard, the

suspicion that Terra would be the place of his dying had grown with every passing day.

He'd hoped his thread would finally be cut on Fenris, in battle, knee-deep in icewater and with bloody axe in hand as the final song of the wild hunt echoed in his skull. That hope felt more and more distant every day, but to die in the shadow of the Allfather's Palace was as good a place to meet the end as any warrior might wish.

'They come to finish what they started on Nikaea!' he shouted, with his fetish-hung staff raised high. 'They took our brothers, cut their threads before their time. Say their names!'

'Gierlothnir Helblind!' cried Svafnir Rackwulf.

'Harr Baelgyr!' shouted Olgyr Widdowsyn.

'Brothers to us all,' answered Bjarki, turning to the three sons of Vulkan.

'But the Allfather brings us new brothers. Tell me your names.'

'I am Atok Abidemi,' said the first of the Salamanders, a powerful warrior with a mighty fang-toothed blade held at his shoulder. 'And these are my

fellow Draaksward.'

'Draaksward?' interrupted Bjarki.

'It means Sword Dragon in the old tongue of Nocturne.'

'Good name.'

'The hammer bearer is Barek Zytos,' continued Abidemi. 'The spearman, Igen Gargo.'

'Draaksward, eh? Well, today you are brothers to the Rout,' said Bjarki, slapping a heavy palm on Abidemi's shoulder guard. 'You are part of our watch pack! Six against the hundreds! They will sing songs of our glorious deaths!'

Before the Salamander could object, rippling traceries of light lifted from Bjarki's staff, cold blue and actinic bright. The light was echoed in his eyes as the blistering heat of the breach dropped sharply and fresh webs of frost patterned the molten rocks. Sharp cracks sounded as hardened stone split with the sudden drop in temperature, and the howling of an oncoming gale swept down from the borealis of shield impacts overhead.

The world around Bjarki faded, the outlines of the warriors around him becoming faint, almost ghostlike. Their flesh, that crude matter that bore their true forms, dimmed in his sight, but the souls within…

How bright we all burn. No wonder we were not made to last.

The mortal world was a blur of meaningless shadows. Instead, he now saw avatars of spirit at his side: his fellow sons of Fenris as blooms of cold fire, the Salamanders searing their forms into the air. Streamers of black flame and molten heat buckled the air around them, warrior souls birthed in the violent upheavals of their home world's core.

He heard the muffled barks of bolter fire and felt the bilious taste of warp magic: a mockery of the power infusing his flesh, a corruption of the link between man and the earth they trod. That compact was ancient and sacred, and the powers wielded by the sons of the Cyclops were a sick perversion of that singular bond.

Bjarki could see the enemy coming, too-bright flames against the grey mist of the physical realm, their spirits burning with such all-consuming light he wondered how they could not see that it was devouring them from within. Such a fire would burn away whatever humanity was left to them and leave them naught but ghosts.

Steel clashed with steel, gunfire whipped the smoke, and crumping

detonations threw up fountains of rock and dust. None of it touched Bjarki, every shard and fragment whipped away by the whirlwind building around him.

The bleak sorcery of the Thousand Sons twisted reality and broke every natural law, but the icy winds of psychic force building around Bjarki kept the

worst of it at bay. Searing fires bent and twisted in the face of his storm's fury. Shivering terrors torn from the blackest corners of a warrior's fear died in the teeth of its spectral ice. The howling unpredictability of the storm made a mockery of any attempt to scry its future path and the actions of the warriors who stood ready at its razored edges.

He saw a shimmering form of mercury brightness. A warrior leaping from the air towards him. Bjarki caught the traitor in an icy squall and slammed him to the ground, stepping in and driving the blazing tip of his staff down through the warrior's chest. Plumes of violet light sprayed from the wound as Bjarki worked the staff deeper. The sorcerer's magic withered in the face of his fraying thread, and Bjarki felt not a moment's pity for him.

The heavy, brutal clash of armour echoed dully within the mist and ice of the storm. This was the oldest form of war known to humanity: grunting men heaving at one another in a contest of strength of arms and legs, of will and determination. No matter how far technology advanced, no matter the sophistication of foes, or whatever arcane rules of combat were in place, it always came down to warriors at close quarters, looking one another in the eye as death hovered close.

An impact spun him around. Mass-reactive. It detonated a fraction of a second later, a tumbling fragment slicing the shaven skin just above his ear.

Warm blood ran down his cheek and over his lips. He tasted the hard metal flavour of it and grinned, spreading the blood over his teeth and cheeks with his palm like the savage the Prosperines believed him to be.

Fire bloomed as a phosphor-bright warrior reared up before him. A thrusting staff rammed into his midriff, driving him down to one knee. His foe expected him to retreat, to regain his feet and breath, but Bjarki leaned in. He lunged forward and swung his own staff low, hooking the legs out from the warrior before him.

His fist closed over the helmet of the downed warrior and twin blades of ice stabbed from his palm and through the lenses of the sorcerer's faceplate.

Unclean fire gouted from the warrior's mouth, a psychic death spasm that

made Bjarki feel unclean to witness.

He shielded his eyes as a newborn sun flared to life overhead.

Looking up through splayed fingers, he saw a titanic form, red and winged, feathered and hard-edged in gold. A rippling vessel of divine flesh forged in a crucible of magic and science. It cycled through a thousand forms in an instant: a wandering sage, a winged avatar of temptation, a vast wheel of eyes that turned ten thousand times in an instant – wing upon wing, millions of seething protean forms that would never be born, and multitudes more that would be.

Bjarki felt a sliver of horror slide into his soul.

Magnus the Red.

They had fought avatars of the Crimson King's soul on Aghoru and Nikaea, but this was the primarch restored. Before, they'd possessed weapons to fight Magnus: a vessel to bind his soul, or a monster that was his equal. Now they had nothing but their own skill at arms and strength of heart.

How pitiful that was.

The thought lasted a fraction of a second only, but it was enough to stoke the fires of Bjarki's rage. They were the Sons of Russ, warriors of the Wolf King. No fight was unwinnable to them, no foe invincible. The Allfather had seen fit to bring him to this place, and for his own resolve to falter at the first sight of the enemy drove Bjarki into a towering fury.

He threw back his head and loosed a howl that would have frozen the blood of every prey creature on Fenris. It was the howl of the world wolf, the weaver of wyrd, and the heartbeat of the universe.

He felt the smouldering, soot-black presence of Nocturne's sons and grinned.

'What are you doing?' said Abidemi, sensing the imminence of his power.

'The icy heart of Fenris is far, and its song is little more than a whisper on the wind,' said Bjarki, his voice oddly textured, as though echoing from the heart

of a cave. ‘But the world spirit of Terra…? It is *old* and it is *deep*. The power that moves within its bedrock and flows in the seams between its skin of stone is the strongest I have ever felt.’

Bjarki extended his bloodied gauntlet.

‘Take my hand, Atok Abidemi, and we will fly as dragons of fire and ice!’

The Draaksward gripped his arm in the old way, and Bjarki brought his

staff down hard.

The rock beneath split with the otherworldly force of impact, as if the hand-carved wolfwood of the staff had bored down into the very heart of the world.

So much power. Truly, where else could the Allfather’s dream take flight but here…?

A geyser of power poured into Bjarki and Abidemi, channelled by the grain and whorls of the staff’s structure and given form by the legacies of honour carried by the two warriors.

Razored daggers of ice and ash swirled around him, and he spun his staff to drive the furious ambition of the power wrought between them to greater intensity. The icy winds surrounding Bjarki howled as though the fanged companions of the Wolf King himself attended him, even as the choking heat of the ash blistered his skin.

An eruption of light exploded above them, twin forms intertwining, serpentine and *alive*.

They coiled around one another as they rose higher into the air, screaming at this birth as though the mortal world were hostile to them. One was sheened in white, blinding in its feral radiance: a rearing wolf of dazzling brilliance, woven from raptures and the cold legends of Fenris. Its twin was its opposite in every way, a draconic titan of burning black smoke, shot through with blazing veins of molten orange.

Its eyes were smouldering coals, tempered in the heart of a forge and ready to burn, its teeth and claws were ebon hooks. Their howls and roars shook the earth itself as they reared beyond Abidemi and Bjarki, twisting around one another until their opposing natures forced them apart.

The twin avatars fell upon the blazing light of Magnus on wings of ember and howls of vengeance. Claws of ice tore at the primarch as pyroclastic clouds billowed in the breath of the furnace serpent. It choked the vents and rebreathers of the traitors below with burning ash.

The storm of ash and fire scoured the ground before the breach, throwing up screeds of irradiated rubble and debris. Superheated steam vaporised unprotected flesh, and frozen limbs shattered at the slightest impact. Fused with the energies of Terra's world spirit, no sorcery could breach that barrier, or harm those behind it.

'It's beautiful…' whispered Abidemi, his voice carrying to Bjarki despite

the storm.

'Do not look upon it,' replied Bjarki, his voice cracking with the strain of conjuring such awesome energies. 'Such powers do not suffer the sight of mortals.'

The forge dragon coiled around Magnus, and Bjarki could see flicker ing points of light borne up by its motion. The light of subtle bodies, dimming like drifting cinders blown from a dying fire. The lone wolf, never one for the leash, circled the primarch, its jaws snapping shut on Magnus' light even as it herded others into the fires of the dragon's wrath.

The wolf and the dragon basked in their freedom, revelling in the all-too-mortal urge to destroy without conscience, to wreak havoc without consequence. The light of Magnus dimmed, obscured by a blizzard of ice and seething clouds of volcanic smoke. A black rain, cold and caustic, fell in greasy sheets, and Bjarki tasted the hot metal and molten stone borne upwards from Terra's lightless depths.

He felt the presence of Magnus diminish. Not in death, never that. No power conjured by mere mortals could achieve such a feat. Not in death, but in

defeat. Bjarki felt the fury of the Red Cyclops, the arrogant rage of a victory snatched away. Magnus was strong, but his certainty of his own infallibility was his greatest weakness.

Bjarki sank to his knees, savouring the fury of the world wolf even as the connection to it devoured him from within. Abidemi went down with him, unable to release his grip, their arms locked together as surely as if they were conjoined from birth.

Explosions painted the air, hundreds of detonations marching down the breach. Hard echoes of mass-reactives burst around them in swelling volleys. He caught glimpses of transhuman figures in blood red and vivid gold.

Imperial banners whipped by the thermal vortices.

‘So… powerful,’ he said. ‘Have you ever felt anything like it…?’

‘Bjarki,’ grunted Abidemi. ‘It’s… killing… us. Let it go!’

He felt Abidemi struggle to release his grip, the dragon’s continued existence consuming the Salamander as surely as the wolf was Bjarki. But he tightened his hold, binding them together and ignoring his own warning to stare into the struggle above.

‘Must hold… on,’ he said through gritted, bloody teeth. ‘Magnus must

pay!’

‘Release me!’ demanded Abidemi, surging to his feet, but Bjarki could not follow. His limbs were powerless, drained of marrow and bone and meat and muscle, utterly without strength.

‘You must let it go!’ yelled Abidemi. ‘The warriors of the Angel and Dorn are here!’

‘No, brother…’ he said. ‘Not yet. Must… finish this…’

Bjarki’s vision faded to grey, misty as the thread of his life un wound. He felt the brightness of unshakeable resolve fill his brother Astartes.

Was it time already? Surely not so soon…

He looked up and saw the flash of an ancient blade being raised.

Firelight glinted from ebon teeth that tore the air with a roar to match that of the dragon.

Bjarki had given all to bring the world wolf and forge dragon into being.

It was killing him, but he had driven the Crimson King back.

Bjarki was not about to give up power such as that.

And Atok Abidemi knew it.

'I am sorry, brother,' said Abidemi.

Draukoros swung down, severing Bjarki's arm just below the elbow.

Alivia did not know where she was.

Down in the darkness beneath the world that shouldn't have surprised her.

The foundations of the Imperial Palace were ancient and deep, built and rebuilt a thousand times over the millennia. No carto grapher could ever fully map its labyrinthine depths, and no technology had reliably plumbed its endlessly twisting passageways.

But no one knew these secret ways better than Malcador.

The passage he led Alivia down was uncomfortably narrow, wide enough only for her to follow in the Sigillite's footsteps. The walls were fashioned from glossy black tiles, repellently slick to the touch and suspiciously free of dust or cracks. Something in the oddly angled dimensions of the tunnel, together with the offset placement of the unique tiles and their ill-proportioned scale, sent a tremor of unease down Alivia's spine. No two tiles were alike, and Alivia's suspicion was that some fundamental difference existed between her human sensory perceptions and those of the passageway's builders.

With each branching twist downwards, she felt less and less sure that she could navigate back to the surface and the unremarkable door at the base of the drum tower through which they'd begun this journey.

With Promeus' pronouncement that Magnus was attacking the Western Hemispheric, the warriors of the Rout had rushed away. Just before slamming the door behind him, Bjarki had looked back at her and she'd thought for a single, ridiculous, moment he was expecting her to follow him.

Yes, Alivia had some skill at arms, and yes, she had killed more people than she cared to remember, but she wasn't a soldier. She hadn't stood in the ranks since the conquests of Boeotia and Euboea, and this was not a war where individual martial ability mattered, not in any meaningful way.

But Bjarki had only sent a warning glance at Malcador and said, 'Watch that one, and take care with your wyrd, Mistress Sureka,' before vanishing with his brothers.

Alivia kept her gaze fixed on Malcador's back, finding that looking too long at the oddly angled tiles made her feel mildly nauseous. It was cold down here, and she was thankful for the thermal bindings beneath her thick coat. Vivyen's chapbook nestled inside a pocket of the inner liner, her daughter insisting on the verge of tears that she take it with her before leaving for her meeting with Malcador in the drum tower. Alivia had gratefully accepted it, knowing she would have little time to read any of the many stories within.

To keep her head warm, she wore a thick *ushanka* with furred flaps that covered her ears and tied beneath her chin. Above her right eye, a brass pin badge depicted a pair of crossed lances over a silver skull. What regiment it represented was a mystery, and Alivia hoped there wasn't a soldier somewhere out on the walls with ears that were freezing off thanks to her petty theft.

Malcador, too, wore a heavy cloak of furs and a thick, turban-like head covering, though she suspected his concession to warmth was an affectation. Still, the fingers gripping the onyx black of his staff were pale and bloodless, so perhaps he *did* feel the cold.

‘You still haven’t told me where we’re going,’ she said.

Her voice echoed strangely, as if the gloss black walls weren’t reflecting sound quite the way they should.

‘And nor shall I,’ said Malcador. ‘To speak of a thing is to fix it in place, and the paths I must navigate through the Palace will only lead us astray if our destination is named.’

‘Always with the riddles. It’s one of the many, *many* things I hate about you.’

Malcador looked up and around, as though afraid of being overheard.

‘I don’t seek to deceive you, Alivia, but you know as well as I that some things cannot be spoken of simply.’

‘These aren’t normal tunnels, are they?’

‘No, they are not,’ admitted Malcador. ‘Sometimes even I must move unseen through the warp and weft of its architect’s grand design.’

‘Does the Emperor know of these tunnels? The Custodians? I imagine Valdor would be *very* interested to know there are secret ways through the Palace even he doesn’t know.’

‘Constantin protects the Emperor in his way, I protect Him in mine.’

‘And I’m guessing Valdor wouldn’t approve of your way. Why is that?’

‘The Custodians are loyal beyond imagining,’ said Malcador. ‘Beyond any understanding you or I could possibly comprehend. It is literally coded into their very genes and psyche, and while that iron devotion is necessary, it is sometimes too dogmatic to accept any option that might place their charge in danger.’

Alivia stopped, as shocked as if Malcador had slapped her.

‘Is this, whatever *this* is, putting the Emperor in danger?’

‘It might, yes, but it is by His own design and His own devising,’ said Malcador.

‘Why?’

‘Redemption.’

‘Redemption? Whose?’

‘Perhaps all of us,’ said Malcador, turning and walking away.

Alivia shook her head. Was nothing simple any more?

When had things ever *been simple?*

‘Well, if you won’t say where we’re going, at least tell me why you need *me*,’ said Alivia. ‘What can I do, *only* me, that makes you willing to listen to John and ease my family’s passage to Terra? And then grant them sanctuary within the inner walls of the Palace. Tell me that, and no riddles or I swear I’ll strangle you right now.’

‘I told you, I need you to save the Emperor.’

‘I presumed that was grandstanding for Promeus and the Wolves. Tell me the real reason.’

‘That *is* the real reason,’ said Malcador, pausing to rest on his staff. ‘I know you don’t trust me, Alivia–’

She laughed bitterly. ‘You’ve never given me a reason to trust you. All the long years I’ve known you, known Him, I can count on one hand the number of times you’ve given me a straight answer.’

‘Civilisations are not won and held by men who give straight answers.’

‘That’s a depressing world view.’

Malcador sighed, as if tiring of her barbs.

‘The war against Horus has many fronts,’ he said. ‘It is fought in grand strategic realms where the likes of Rogal Dorn and his brothers excel, and it is fought through the sights of a lowly las-trooper, such as the young man of the Sixteenth Arctic Hort whose ushanka you wear.’

Alivia took off her hat and squinted at the regimental crest.

‘And it is waged by those who walk in shadow, who must shoulder the burden of decisions too terrible for others to bear, who must make dreadful choices no one should ever face.’

Here he paused to look back at Alivia. ‘And it is waged by those who can suffer the many hurts such a long war entails.’

‘Is that why John and I are here?’ asked Alivia. ‘What about the others?

Oll? Prytanis? What about them? Are they here too?’

‘Some, and they too will play their part. Some willingly, some less so.’

‘Is John here? In the Palace, I mean?’

He hesitated before answering. ‘Wherever John is, he is where he needs to be.’

Malcador led them to a tapered doorway, barely tall or wide enough for either of them to pass through. Alivia had the sense of a large space beyond and felt a cold wind caress the skin of her cheeks, bearing the taste of salt: like ocean spray at a wharf. It didn’t taste like any air she’d breathed on Terra. It felt old and dead.

She ducked through and a moment of dizzying vertigo seized her as she moved from the claustrophobic passageway to a vast cavern whose ceiling rose to cloud-lapped heights, and which fell into a depthless chasm that echoed to the sound of waterfalls.

Alivia sank to one knee, pressing a palm flat on the ground to steady herself.

Malcador reached out to touch her shoulder. The strength of his grip was surprising for a man so thin-boned and tired looking. She flinched in revulsion. He hadn't made contact with her skin, but her reaction was instinctual: a primate's reaction to being touched by things that squirm and crawl in darkness.

'Alivia?'

'Don't touch me again,' she said, taking a deep breath.

He nodded and turned back to their route.

'Then follow me. And stay close.'

She rose on unsteady legs and followed him onto an outflung walkway that arched out over the chasm to a distant column of red stone that looked wholly alien to Terra.

Square-cut steps corkscrewed down its length, descending into darkness.

'These are *definitely* not normal tunnels,' said Alivia.

'They were abandoned before the first stone of the first tower was laid on the mountains above,' said Malcador. 'The builders of Leng knew of these low roads, but eventually abandoned them. Some of the markers down here are theirs, but they had long departed this realm before the Emperor unlocked the gates sealing them.'

'How do you navigate down here?' asked Alivia. 'I get the sense there isn't a map. At least not in any normal sense.'

'There are maps of meaning if you know where to look and how to read them, but even I walk these paths with care. A way that was open one time may be closed another. Or ways that never were now beckon the unwary traveller.'

'Have you ever got lost down here?'

'Thankfully not,' said Malcador. 'But I have seen the bones of those who have.'

‘Well, that’s reassuring.’

‘Come,’ said Malcador. ‘Stay close, and I will show you where gods have walked.’

‘I’ve seen places like that,’ said Alivia. ‘They’re filled with the blood and bodies of mortals.’

Bjarki and Abidemi summon the power of their world spirits.

BOOK THREE

HALL OF LENG

EIGHT

Souls of Consequence

The scale of the devastation was almost impossible to process.

Viewed through the cracked and filmy armourglass of a circling Storm Eagle, Promeus guessed the entire nineteen-kilometre stretch of Western Hemispheric had borne the brunt of this latest assault.

Fires burned all along the length of the wall, and soot-black smoke shrouded the ramparts.

A pall of dust and aerosolised blood made every breath taste of metal.

The entirety of the wall was a scene of horror, but it was upon the breach where the atomic had detonated that Promeus focused his gaze.

‘Radiation levels are too high for non-Astartes,’ said the pilot over the vox.

His name was Kandallo, and he was a stoic warrior in the gold livery of an Imperial Fist. His right arm was missing, as was most of his left leg. Wire-bound lengths of neuro-activator cable clamped to his raw stumps allowed him to fly the Storm Eagle one-handed until he could be fitted with augmetics that would allow him to return to the front lines.

The clicking of the gunship's rad counter had become so concentrated that it was now a continuous, droning backdrop that not even the deafening roar of the Storm Eagle's engines could entirely obscure.

'I've taken high-dose anti-rad meds,' said Promeus, 'and I don't intend to be here long.'

'Every minute you spend in these levels is one minute too many.'

'Then I'll be quick.'

'Be sure that you are.'

Promeus knew that coming this close to the aftermath of an atomic detonation was recklessly dangerous, but the nagging sensation of something terribly amiss was a hungry rat gnawing its way out of his belly.

He didn't know *what* was wrong, only that something was off-kilter in a fundamental way.

Kandallo brought the gunship in low from the north-east, keeping as close to the shattered rooftops as possible. Airspace within the aegis was rigidly controlled, and anything airborne was considered a target unless proven otherwise. Their authorisation to fly within the Palace precincts came from the Sigillite himself – by virtue of Promeus' connection to Magnus – but even so, the dull, psychic awareness of the servitor-crewed guns on the walls tracking them was unmistakeable.

He tried and failed to process the scale of the fight that had taken place here; it was impossible to comprehend – as was almost every engagement in this siege. Corpses without number bedecked the walls and the slopes before them, the swathes of ruined flesh badly mangled and so thoroughly dismembered that it was impossible even to guess how many had died.

Thousands? Tens of thousands? Just another day, another *afternoon*, on Terra.

Hundreds of wounded stumbled away from the walls, covered in blood and lost to the shock-trauma of the assault. Many were missing limbs and didn't seem to notice, or carried them bundled in their uniform jackets.

Flash-blinded wretches clung to the walls in darkness or were helped by their sobbing comrades. The death toll here would be abominable, but the roll call for the wounded would be many times larger.

'Even if we win, will we be able to bear the cost…?' he whispered.

His gaze lingered on a group of Blood Angels moving through the crowds of wounded, the red of their warplate scoured by the fire and fury of the attack. Something in their bearing struck Promeus as unusual, but a drifting bank of smoke obscured the ground, and when he looked again, he could no longer see them.

Human remains mingled with Astartes bodies and those of other creatures with matted fur, scaled hides and leathery flesh, for the attack had not simply ended with the arrival of the IX and VII Legions. It had taken the ferocity of the combined Blood Angels, Imperial Fists and Army reserves in sealed tanks to push the Thousand Sons and their bestial allies from the wall. The beasts had been scorched hairless by radiation, their wasted bodies blistering and sloughing flesh from their bones, but they had fought tooth and claw to cling to the walls.

Tamaya's Blood Angels held the flanks of the main breach, with an unbroken wall of Iacono's Imperial Fists holding and rebuilding the centre.

A haze of furnace heat rippled the air over the wall as securement parties hosed the breach with rapid-setting lockcrete, pierced the ground with blast-shot rebar, and bolted refractor generators into place atop the surviving portions of the parapet.

'Given twelve hours, the Imperial Fists could make this wall viable again,'

said Kandallo.

‘Time is the one thing we don’t have,’ said Promeus, looking into the crackling smog banks beyond the walls, like tsunamis of elemental force ready to crash over the Palace and everyone within it. ‘And no matter what they’re able to do, it won’t be enough.’

Shadows jerked and stuttered in the fog, fleeting impressions of horns and claws, teeth and unblinking eyes. Such malice was hidden within, potent and hate-filled.

So much had happened since the heady, innocent days when he and Kallista, Camille and Mahavastu had shared caffeine under an awning and debated why they had been assigned as remembrancers to the XV Legion.

Back then, the galaxy made sense, and the idea that the Thousand Sons would follow the Warmaster down the road of treachery was absurd.

Treachery.

The very word tasted ashen in his mouth.

Even after all he had seen and done, he could still barely bring himself to speak it.

The Storm Eagle tilted on its axis and began a rapid downwards spiral, guided in by an Imperial Fist in armour so drenched in gore that Promeus first mistook him for one of the Angel’s warriors.

Promeus unbuckled himself from the grav-seat as the crew door rolled back and hot air surged inside. Immediately, his skin felt the killing blush of radiation, and his heart rate spiked as he tasted the heavy metals, isotopic toxins and caustic fumes casting a pall over Western Hemispheric.

‘Remember, do not linger here,’ warned Kandallo.

Promeus nodded and stepped down from the gunship. He felt the heat through his boots, each step sticky as the thick rubber soles softened.

Thousands of warriors moved through the space behind the wall, bulky transhumans in heavy warplate, masked Army and dozens of pioneer units

working to shore up the damage.

‘This is no place for mortals,’ said the Imperial Fist who’d guided the gunship down.

‘So I’m told,’ replied Promeus.

‘You should get back on that gunship and leave,’ insisted the warrior.

Promeus shook his head. ‘I’m looking for Bödvar Bjarki, a warrior of the Sixth Legion.’

The Imperial Fist jerked his thumb in the direction of a series of plastic-sided tents set up in the lee of the wall. A hastily assembled aid station.

Promeus started to thank him, but the warrior was already moving away, discarding any memory of his presence. He shrugged and hurried over to the aid station, clutching his musette bag tight as he heard loud cursing in *Futharc* from within. Lakes of murky water pooled around its perimeter, and acrid counterseptic fumes hung in the air.

He pushed through a rubber strip-curtain, tasting the bitter reek of lye and the warm, metallic flavour of the decontamination showers. The interior of the aid station was filled with Astartes warriors, the vulnerable joints and cabling of their armour being hosed clean of radioactive dust. Most were Blood Angels and Imperial Fists, so it wasn’t hard to spot Svafnir Rackwulf and Olgyr Widdowsyn. They stood with their arms upraised as medicae personnel in hazmat suits hosed them down with chlorinated water and scrubbed their armour with hard-bristled brushes.

Both Astartes seemed to find the process wildly amusing, and laughed at the none-too-gentle attentions of the medicae staff. Patches of bare metal gleamed where their Legion colours had been scoured away by radiation and the decontamination process.

Rackwulf saw him coming and said, ‘You come for a cooling shower too, wyrd-wraith?’

‘These men with the brushes, they tickle,’ added Widdowsyn.

‘Where’s Bjarki?’ he said.

‘There,’ said Rackwulf, spitting a wad of phlegm to the rear of the aid station.

Promeus nodded and eased his way through the masked staff and armoured warriors to find Bjarki sitting on an empty ammo crate. A warrior in unfamiliar armour and with his back to Promeus was bent over the Space Wolf, working on something he couldn’t see.

Two warriors in dripping, gleaming warplate stood over him, and such was the damage done to their armour, it took Promeus a second to realise they were XVIII Legion. Like Rackwulf and Widdowsyn, much of their colours had been burned and scoured away, leaving their armour a patchwork of jade green and raw ceramite.

‘Salamanders?’ he said, and the two warriors turned to face him.

Hostility bristled from them, and Promeus halted, his hands spread wide.

‘Promeus?’ said Bjarki without looking up. ‘Even over the stink of decontaminants I can still smell you. Your sweat tastes of *hrosshvalus* blubber, but you shouldn’t be here unless it’s to take a shower. There’s rad-fire all around. Very bad for mortals, they tell me. Bad for us too, but not so bad it’ll kill us.’

‘Did you see him?’ asked Promeus.

‘See who?’

‘Magnus, who else? Did you… Wait, what happened to your arm?’

The Salamander with his back to Promeus had sat up straight, revealing the work he’d been doing to seal off the stump where Bjarki’s left arm had once been. A crude clamp had been affixed to Bjarki’s armour around his elbow, a beaten metal cap to cover the stump of his arm. Promeus’ hand of flesh and blood went to the porcelain smoothness of his own augmetic as the memory of Kamiti Sona and the agonising fire that burned away his limb returned.

Bjarki saw the gesture and said, ‘ *Ja*, I now know your pain, remembrancer.’

‘What happened?’

Bjarki nodded to the towering Salamander and said, ‘My new brother, Atok Abidemi, cut it off with that big bastard sword of his.’

Promeus glanced at the monstrous, jagged-toothed chainsword at Abidemi’s back, and didn’t doubt for a second that it might have hewn Bjarki’s arm.

‘Why?’

‘Because he would have killed us both if I had not,’ said the warrior Bjarki

had named Abidemi, his voice like blocks of igneous rock grinding together in the throat of a volcano.

‘He’s not wrong,’ said Bjarki, as if the matter of his missing arm were of no consequence. ‘The power of the world wolf is like too much *dzira*. Once it gets in your blood, it is hard to resist holding on to that feeling just a little longer, even as it kills you. I used my strength and that of Atok to draw forth the manifest power of our Legions – a mighty dragon of fire and ash from his, a winter wolf of endless ice from mine. Such a sight, Promeus, you would have written epics of their battle! They tore at the Red Cyclops, and by the Allfather’s oath he shed blood. To see him hurting… ah, it was a fine thing, too fine. In my fury, I would have killed us both to see the monster bleed a little longer…’

‘You hurt him? *You actually hurt Magnus the Red?* ’

‘Aye, we did!’

The warrior Bjarki had named Abidemi appraised him coolly.

‘This is the one you spoke of?’ he said, rising to his full height. ‘The one who hosted the Crimson King’s soul for a time?’

The words were edged in violence, as though Abidemi might reach for his hideous sword and split Promeus in two.

‘That’s him,’ replied Bjarki, flexing what remained of his arm. ‘He doesn’t look like much, but there’s strength to him. You have no cause to fret on his loyalty, fireborn. His wyrd and that of the Red Cyclops are no longer entwined, but they do remember each other. It was Promeus who warned us of the traitor’s presence at Western Hemispheric.’

Abidemi tilted his head to the side, reappraising him. Promeus’ heart thudded hard in his chest as the Salamander swept up his sword, but it was only to sheathe it over his shoulder.

The warrior took a step towards Promeus, his red eyes boring into him.

‘Why are you here?’ he asked. ‘You must have been told this area was lethally dangerous to mortals, yet still you came. Why?’

Promeus resisted taking a backward step in the face of the Salamander’s bulk. The man’s ebon skin and burning eyes were utterly inhuman, but he saw something there he recognised.

‘Because something’s wrong. I don’t know what, but nothing of this attack makes sense. For as long as the Warmaster’s forces have been attacking the walls, we’ve seen nothing of Magnus beyond the attack on Gorgon Bar and Colossi. Why Western Hemispheric? Why now? Why use a weapon to breach the walls that prevents you using your overwhelming advantage in numbers? Why give up so easily after such an explosive breach?’

‘You think the Sons gave up *easily*?’ said one of the Salamanders behind him, a titan with a grotesquely oversized hammer held at his shoulders.

Promeus hadn’t noticed until now, but he was completely boxed in by the Salamanders.

Despite Bjarki’s vouchsafe, they didn’t trust him.

In their eyes he was tainted by the touch of the Crimson King.

‘Tell me what happened with Magnus,’ said Promeus. ‘All of you. Leave nothing out.’

Abidemi began the tale, his account dry and factual, and Promeus let his psychic senses drift slowly outwards, drawing in the memory of what the Salamander had seen and felt. As Bjarki added his own account to the story, more details took shape in Promeus' mind.

In his original life, the one before his selection to the remembrancer order, before even the fruitless years he'd spent scouring the globe in search of a cure for his dying wife, he had used his psychic ability to read the auras of those with whom he did business, sifting truth from lies and following his preternatural intuition to become absurdly wealthy.

Now he built the memory of these warriors into a mental projection within his mind, seeing the desperate conflict on the ramparts. The smoke, the blood, the screaming and the thunderous blasts of artillery. He felt the heat of the dragon's birth and the bone-freezing cold of the wolf's breath.

As truly awesome as they were, his mortal heart quailed at the sight of them.

These were the unleashed souls of Bjarki and Abidemi's Legions, and only a madman wouldn't recoil in horror at the sight of such pure destructive force given form.

We yoked the power of monsters to our cause.

He stiffened as he saw the Legion avatars coil around the numinous figure of Magnus, clawing and biting, tearing and ripping the pristine gold of his armoured form. Promeus tasted the black rain, like the deluge that had drowned Prospero's last moments. He had not seen that rain, hadn't tasted its ashen, brackish flavour, but the shard of the Crimson King's soul had seen it and tasted it, so the memory was as strong as if he'd stood amid the fires of Tizca's doom and watched it burn.

He saw Magnus scream in pain, and understood Bjarki's reluctance to release the power that was hurting his most hated enemy. A flash of gold, a bloom of red in the tortured sky, and it was over. The Sons falling back, their godlike master banished from sight.

When the tale was finished, Promeus felt the heat and ice of the twin avatars flow from his body, and he was glad of their departure. He replayed their last

moments in his mind, seeing again the agony of Magnus, the fear in his eye as he quit the field of battle.

Again.

Wolf and dragon, biting and clawing.

Again.

Golden lightning. A whipcrack of displaced air. A sliver of gold, a breath of old air.

Again.

Fear in Magnus' eye.

No. That's what he wanted anyone with the wit to see to think.

Promeus turned to Abidemi. 'You saw him retreat? Magnus? You saw him fall back with his Legion sons?'

'I did,' said Abidemi.

'You're sure? Absolutely sure?'

'Yes,' snapped Abidemi. 'My eyes pierce smoke and fire better than any man here. I saw him broken and bleeding. I saw him limp back into the concealing smog.'

'Did you?' said Promeus urgently. 'I need to know you saw him retreat.'

'I did,' said Bjarki, standing and gathering up his staff. 'Why do you need to know if we saw him flee?'

'I think you saw what he wanted you to see,' said Promeus, turning and running from the aid station. A dreadful, gut-wrenching sensation was uncoiling in his stomach. Perhaps it was nascent radiation poisoning, but he didn't think so. His mind awash with images of Magnus in battle with the wolf

and the dragon, Promeus cast his mind outward, far beyond the battle-ruined shell of Western Hemispheric.

Ahzek Ahriman had taught him how to push his mind farther than he'd ever thought possible, and the irony that he was now turning those self-same powers against them was not lost on Promeus.

He fell to his knees as he tasted the very edges of the hate, horror and madness beyond the walls. A swamp of minds broken and enslaved, an ocean of sickness with fragments of poisoned glass lodged in every heart and every eye.

Amid the millions of firefly pinpricks of mortal and Astartes lives, larger suns burned, too bright to look upon. Once mighty souls, bound to a higher purpose, and now sullied by a doom of their own making. His power was not so great as to name them or see them as anything other than impossibly powerful stars of cursed brightness.

Yet even among these damned stars, one ought to have burned brighter than all others.

'You're not there…' said Promeus.

'What are you talking about?' demanded Abidemi.

Promeus turned to face the warriors of the Salamanders and Space Wolves, looking past them to the very heart of the Emperor's fastness.

Now he understood the source of his gnawing fear.

'The Crimson King…' said Promeus. 'He's *inside* the Palace.'

They moved through the defenders like ghosts.

Like prey animals deep in the hunting grounds of carnotaurs.

The air was thick with radiation and fear.

Is this the end?

Who will look after my children when I'm gone?

The Emperor protects.

I don't want to die.

The Emperor has abandoned us.

Take him*, not me.*

The five of them moved against the human tide, heading eastward from the ruins of Western Hemispheric. Shell impacts flared overhead, amid streaking contrails of missiles and atmospheric detonations. They mimicked the leaden gait of the wounded or traumatised who simply wandered away from the aftermath of the fighting.

As if there could ever be an escape from the grinding slaughters enacted every day.

Magnus looked down at the warplate of his sons, Ahriman, Amon, Menkaura and Atrahasis, still seeing the proud red and the pale serpentine

circle emblazoned on their shoulder guards. A symbol that marked them as bound to the service of the Warmaster.

But I…

To any who looked upon him, Magnus was now cloaked in the illusory guise of a loyalist warrior of the line: sturdy Mark IV armour and a chipped shoulder guard bearing the winged blood drop of the IX Legion.

He felt his sons' discomfort at seeing their gene-sire as one of them.

'It disturbs you to see me thusly?' asked Magnus.

His voice was calm, soothing and confident, but devoid of its usual commanding power.

+As it would any of your loyal sons, my lord,+ sent Ahriman.

'Speak aloud,' warned Magnus. ***'The hunters will be alert for psychic anomalies within the Sanctum Imperialis.'***

'Apologies, my lord,' said Ahriman, 'but I find it hard to reconcile the image of an enemy with the knowledge that he is my primarch. Even the greatest magi of the Athanaeans would balk at psychic manipulation on such a colossal scale.'

Thousands of enemy surrounded them: loyalist Astartes, Army, Mechanicum, civilian and migou workers, but none of them truly saw the Thousand Sons in their midst. The dull minds of mortals and their once-brothers pressed in on Ahriman's consciousness like a polluted ocean rising to swallow an island paradise.

***'This host does not care about us**, '* said Magnus. ***'They think only in terms of the minute-to-minute horror they feel, their fear of pain and what they can inflict in retaliation**. '*

'You are my primarch,' said Ahriman. 'I have seen your power bear an entire city across the galaxy, but *this*… How is it possible we walk unseen in the lair of our enemies beneath their telaethesic shield?'

'Look up,' said Magnus. ***'What do you see?'***

'A rippling sheen of petrochemical light refracting through the aegis shield.'

'And?'

'Patterns. Chaotically evolving fractals where the shield is failing,' said Ahriman, and Magnus felt his focus drift as it followed the endlessly dividing spirals of variegated light. 'I sense deeper meaning might reveal itself if only I had time to divine it.'

'Careful,' warned Magnus. ***'Do not leave the fifth enumeration.'***

Ahriman pulled his focus back to that most fickle of the golden steps.

‘What do *you* see, my lord?’ asked Menkaura.

‘I see* light ,’** said Magnus. ***‘Reflected light that touches the retinae of everybody around us. The wondrous complexity of the human eye’s biological mechanisms transforms the photons into electrical signals to be interpreted by the brain. Under normal circumstances, were their brains to read those signals correctly, the defenders would perceive our true forms. But I am convincing the brains of all these people to ignore those signals. We are visible in forms I choose for them to perceive.’

‘I have only ever performed so elaborate a deception on a single person,’ said Amon. ‘But to compromise the neurological belief systems of so many psyches at once…’

‘It helps that these men and women are utterly exhausted,’ said Magnus. ***‘Their mental faculties have been ground down almost to the level of servitors after weeks of constant horror. All of which makes it easier to manipulate so many minds without triggering the psychic watchdogs of the Inner Palace, though I use the word “easier” guardedly.’***

‘Not every mind here is so blunted,’ said Menkaura, his venerable gaze sweeping the faces of the Imperial soldiers.

Magnus nodded. ***‘Yes, there are some gifted beyond baseline norms, ones with latent sparks that might have been nurtured to greatness with but the***

slightest care. As much as their dulled sensibilities make it possible to shield us, it saddens me to know that none of these minds will ever reach even a fraction of their true potential. **That** ***is what we will change when this is over, when we can build out the psychic genome properly.'***

Magnus caught a flash of a memory from Ahriman, quickly suppressed, but there was little his sons might think that he would not know.

A battered Storm Eagle gunship, its hull plates a dull ochre colour.

A fleeting moment of connection snapping his head around.

A singular mind within…

'Lemuel Gaumon,' said Magnus, and felt Ahriman flinch at the mention of the man who had dogged their footsteps since before the Warmaster's rebellion. ***'I too felt his presence. His flesh held a fragment of my soul. How could I not?'***

Ahriman hesitated before replying.

'It disturbs me that he is here, my lord. I thought he would be dead.'

Magnus shook his head. ***'We all did, but it means nothing, Ahzek. The greatest conflict the galaxy has ever seen reaches its climax, and the players in this drama must congregate. From the lead actors to the chorus, where else in this melodrama could any soul of consequence be drawn?'***

‘I almost reached out to brush his thoughts,’ said Ahriman, looking out over the teeming multitudes of Imperial souls. ‘Even thinking of Lemuel makes my grip falter.’

Magnus understood the *real* source of Ahriman’s troubles. It touched him too.

‘You feel them all, yes?’ said Magnus, letting his eyes drift, unfocused, over the doomed defenders of his father’s Palace. ***‘Their minds. All their***

thoughts and fears.’

‘I do,’ replied Ahriman. ‘Nobility and wretchedness, and everything in between.’

‘The realisation of mortality brings out the best and worst of humanity.’

The woman who visits underground gatherings of one they call the Saint and dreams of being lifted into the sky on her wings of silver and gold.

The man who sleeps with his commanding officer in hopes of being posted to an unengaged part of the wall.

The man who murdered his wife and volunteered for Western Hemispheric, wrongly thinking his dying will somehow atone for the deed.

The boy who thought this fight would be a grand adventure, but who has now discovered the truth of war’s lie.

So many minds, so many thoughts.

Truth be told, Magnus was enjoying the sheer hubris of this venture.

Bjarki had commandeered a vehicle by the time Promeus had sent word back to the Bhab Bastion of the Crimson King’s intrusion. When Promeus emerged from the aid station, he saw Bjarki pulling up in a boxy slab of metal mounted on quad-tracks with a fore-mounted turret fitted with some kind of gatling cannon. Widdowsyn climbed aboard to man the topside gun, as the three Salamanders circled the vehicle with disdainful eyes.

The Rune Priest dropped down from the armoured side door and battered his one remaining fist against the vehicle's dusty, bullet-scarred plating.

'Look at this!' he cried. 'The man who gave me this said it is called a Taurox.'

'It's the ugliest thing I've ever seen,' said Promeus. 'Throne, is it even safe? It looks like something that's been looted by Nordafrik rad-scavvers before being looted back again by the Army, who didn't even bother to undo the damage.'

'We are none of us pretty,' said Bjarki, grinning and holding up his severed arm. 'Besides, Barek Zytos tells me a taurox is a legendary beast of their home world. A good sign, ja?'

'A taurox is a lethally dangerous beast of the Arridian Plain,' said Zytos, locking his hammer over his shoulder. 'I always wanted to kill a bull taurox one day, but I do not suppose I ever will now.'

' *Gave* you it?' said Promeus, rapping his knuckles on the battered plating.

Flakes of rust drifted.

Bjarki shrugged. 'He wasn't using it, and the men it once carried are dead.'

'Oh, well that makes me feel a whole lot better about riding in it.'

'It is no Thunderwolf, but at least it is fast.'

Bjarki planted his staff and leaned it against the hull of the Taurox as Abidemi circled around to the crew door. Before the Salamander could climb aboard, he said, 'Friend Atok.'

Abidemi turned, his dark skin sheened in sweat and his eyes alight with fresh purpose.

Bjarki stood before him as Svafnir Rackwulf circled around behind, a pack-mate sealing a prey-creature's retreat. The disfigured huntsman handed Bjarki his toothed spear, and folded his arms like a gene-bred lifeward.

‘We came to Terra by very different paths,’ said Bjarki. ‘Like the frayed ends of a long and ancient rope. But now the wyrd tells me our threads wind together, becoming one.’

Bjarki tapped the spear-tip to his breast, where Promeus saw he had carved the angular shape of what looked like a roaring draconic head into the plastron of his armour.

‘You spilled the blood of Fenris to save my life, and that makes us brothers.’

He spun Rackwulf’s harpoon around, resting the head just above the stump of his ruined arm, the spear-tip aimed at Abidemi’s heart.

‘And what is it you want? To spill some of mine?’

Bjarki laughed. ‘No, brother, but we are bound together. Wolf and Drake, warriors of ice and fire. Such symbolism should not go unmarked. I will cut your warplate as I have marked mine with the symbol of the Dread Biter, the deep dragon of eternal land-thirst. Fire is its blood, yet ice its scaled hide.’

The Rune Priest eased the harpoon forwards, but just before the tip touched the deep green of Abidemi’s plate, the Salamander took hold of it and shook his head.

‘This plate was reforged in the shadow of Mount Deathfire, worked by the smiting hammer of T’kell himself,’ he said. ‘I cannot allow you to carve it, Bjarki.’

‘Not even to mark our brotherhood?’

‘Not even for that,’ affirmed Abidemi. ‘Only artificers of the Promethean cult may work the armour of a Salamanders legionary.’

Bjarki nodded and simply handed the spear back to Svafnir Rackwulf.

‘It is of no matter,’ he said. ‘But the wyrd has shown us so marked.’

He retrieved his staff and climbed aboard the Taurox.

‘Come,’ said Bjarki with a grin. ‘Let’s run that one-eyed bastard to ground.’

NINE

Living Fire

Imperial Aeronautica strategos classified them as Doomfires, but that was simply a catch-all term for multiple patterns of retrofitted bombers capable of void operations and atmospheric work. The e-mag pulse of the atomic detonation over Western Hemispheric blew out seventeen void pylons placed along the Khat Mandau Precinct and the entirety of those rebuilt in the Saturnine Quarter after the devastating after-effects of the Phoenician’s Sonance.

Pioneer crews, requisitioned dockers and conscripted longshoremen were swept up by Mechanicum work gangs to rebuild the aegis network and patch the rapidly degrading coverage. Even now, weeks into the siege, the endless bombardment from orbit and low atmosphere was still drilling down like golden-tipped spears on smoking black hafts, and gaps like this were unacceptable.

Hundreds of thousands of conventional munitions exploded against the aegis shield every day, and volleys of high-velocity macro shells painted the outer extremities of the aegis every second. Against such volume of fire, it was inevitable that dozens would blow through the gaps to pound the fortress beneath.

Entire districts and structures were smoking craters from the penetration of a single warhead. Portable void generators, intended for the protection of command-and-control centres from mobile artillery units, were daisy-chained around the inner circuits of the Sanctum Imperialis to protect the civilian populace as best they could, but such defences were stopgap measures at best.

The gap in aegis cover wasn’t immediately noticed until the twin engines of an Imperial Marauder bomber, returning from a sortie over Annapurna and the

shattered redoubts of Gorgon Bar, finally tore free of the aircraft's superstructure. The burning wreckage arced downwards and exhausted civilians watched as it kept on falling instead of exploding into the rippling force dome overhead.

Trailing black smoke and flames, it slammed into the upper reaches of the southernmost of the Taxonomic Towers, six kilometres east of the dome of the Hegemon. The Marauder's fuel reserves were all but gone, its munitions expended over the enemy encampments of Gorgon Bar's second circuit, so when the upper reaches of the silent tower crashed to the ground in an avalanche of twisted steel and stone, only those adepts within and those refugees clustered around its base were killed. In relative terms, it was an insignificant moment to those within the walls who witnessed the attack craft's demise.

But to those watching beyond the walls, it was so much more.

Enemy chatter passed word of a potential gap in aegis cover, and within minutes, the equivalent of six squadrons of delta-winged aircraft surged from hardened underground bunkers or dropped from low-atmosphere carriers. Imperial augurs saw them almost immediately, for they made no attempt to hide their approach or disguise their target. Close-in defence turrets and anti-air batteries on Adamant and Saturnine filled the sky with frag bursts and raking fire, but e-mag interference meant they were firing blind.

Thunderbolts and Furies already in the air were redirected almost instantaneously, their intercept protocols honed after the ferocious intensity of the air war. Even now, the sky over Western Hemispheric was lousy with blinding dust, vicious thermals that could melt plasteel and spiteful vortices powerful enough to tear the largest aircraft in two.

The engagement was fought over instruments, the obscuring, radio active dust drawn up by the lingering mushroom cloud making a mockery of any attempt to fight visually. Pilots jinked, rolled and dived through blinding clouds that choked ports and fouled vents. Engines stalled and weapons misfired, clogged with dust and atomic interference. Pilots that fought too long died as searing air pockets melted the armourglass of their canopies or rad-squalls detonated the warheads on their missile nacelles.

Explosions painted the sky in sheets of orange flame as weaving trails of shellfire streamed like wind-blown fronds of light. Ejecting from a wounded fighter was suicide, no mortal body could survive the hellstorm of explosions, dogfighting aircraft and searing fireballs.

Only three enemy aircraft survived to punch through the aegis gap, flying below the radiation clouds and trusting to their fellows to keep the Imperial interceptors busy.

Only three.

Three Doomfire bombers classified as *Iniquities*.

Fully laden with cluster bombs and air-to-ground melta missiles.

The walls of Western Hemispheric were twenty-five kilometres behind them, obscured by advancing orange cloud banks threading the wide processionals that ran between the gilded structures of Imperial grandeur.

Dust hung in thick veils over the thousands of refugees huddling close to the architecture of Imperial ambition, laden with toxins and poison that settled deep in the marrow.

Magnus had set a brutal pace, their perceived appearances assuring them unobstructed passage inward, but it was certain their presence would eventually be discovered. This quarter of the Inner Palace was not yet fully overtaken by warriors or muster points, but more were being drawn in from Indomitor and Sanctus with every passing hour.

Convoys of Imperial vehicles ground through the ashen thorough fares bisecting their inward route, throwing up clouds of dust and blocking their passage as they rolled past in their hundreds.

The Thousand Sons paused as a Warlord of Legio Gryphonicus moved south to shore up the beleaguered defences of the Europa Wall, its crashing steps lifting the dust from rooftops and its howling war-horn twitching the smoke with its power. The colossal war engine was limping and drooling smoke from beneath its mighty cara pace, yet it strode proud and defiant. A strutting

Reaver and a pack of loping Warhounds accompanied it, supplicants to its unimagin able power.

Knights of House Cadmus marched on the flanks, their armour scorched back to bare metal and their banners hanging ragged and limp from carapace vox-masts.

Trudging columns of soldiers from a dozen different regiments followed in its wake, every eye haunted by weeks of war and cheeks hollowed by lack of sleep and malnutrition.

As he had promised Perturabo, his presence at Western Hemispheric had galvanised the Imperial defenders to reinforce the Ultimate Wall between Adamant in the south and Bastion Ledge at the farthest northern extremity of the Palace circuit.

Perhaps that would offer up opportunities to exploit elsewhere, but Magnus cared little for his brother's grand game of siege warfare against Dorn. The spectacular failure of the Saturnine gambit had made the Lord of Iron cautious and reluctant to overreach, wary of accepting counsel from those promising quick victory. With the exception of Angron's monsters, the fighting beyond the walls had eased a fraction. The Sons of Horus were licking their wounds from so many grievous losses, and the Emperor's Children had all but removed themselves from the siege.

Each delay or diversion to avoid concentrations of loyalist troops chafed at Magnus. Time was the enemy and despite his poetic words to Ahriman, the appearance of Lemuel Gaumon at the site of their ingress troubled Magnus deeply.

He'd passed it off as a likely inevitability, a fluke coincidence, but Ahriman was too well versed in the ways of the Corvidae to ever truly believe that. A core tenet of that Fellowship was that there was no such things as coincidences, that the dance of the universe was governed by invisible music that played behind the veil of most mortals' understanding.

Some called it the Architecture of Fate, others *Akasha*. The shamans of the VI Legion knew it as wyrd. The seers of Jaghatai spoke of riding the endless

storm.

To Magnus, it was simply *Thelema*, an ancient word that simply meant

'will'.

The teachings of the Corvidae were a Prosperine attempt at hearing the notes of that invisible music and learning the steps of its dance, but knowing Ahriman's old Practicus was close reminded Magnus that not even *he* knew the music as well as he thought.

Surrounded by enemy warriors, the thought was not a comforting one.

They pressed on through the cloying banks of dust, following a path that Magnus had not walked physically in over a century and a half. Here were

the Galleries of Compliance, there the Heraldic Conclave, and glinting in the sickly borealis light of the aegis, were the distant silver towers of the Viridarium Nobiles.

Ahead was the blocky outline of the Hall of Weapons, and beyond its hard, martial edges, and brutalist design, their destination.

Or at least the first part of it.

The Great Observatory was raised on a stepped promontory of dark rock, the titanic structure a wonder of Old Earth even weighed against the great monoliths of its far distant epochs. Its sculpted escarpment walls of Volakas marble were two thousand metres high and veined with amaranthine.

Titanic flying buttresses carved to resemble winged angels anchored it to the mountain bedrock, their outstretched arms raised imploringly to the sky.

The soaring tower that once stood at the heart of Occullum Square at the centre of lost Tizca had been part of the observatory's structure in ages past, one of the many Doric columns encircling the inconceivable circumference of its vast golden dome. The earliest colonists from Old Earth were said to have carried it with them for reasons known only to themselves. Perhaps they had

intended to recreate its glory, or perhaps it was simply a means of holding on to their proud lineage.

Ancient verse spoke of the great dome outshining the sun, and perhaps it once had, but now it was cracked and gaping, the lustre of its pristine white walls black with fire and smoke damage, its angelic buttresses weeping tears of blood.

Ouslite steps, three hundred metres wide, led up towards the great entryway, their entire length obscured by sprawling favelas of temporary structures, tents, awnings and lean-tos housing the living tide spilling from within: civilian refugees from the Katabatic Plains, the Petitioner's City, and Palace outworks that were now nothing more than mud and rubble.

Trees had once lined the grand approach boulevard, silver birch and sycamore, but they were long gone, hauled up by the roots and burned in cookfires. Magnus led his sons between the craters of their uprooting, each absence like a rotten tooth pulled from a gum. He halted as he set foot on the first stair and a memory pushed into his mind like a dull knife.

The Emperor gazing up through the observatory's aetheric lensworks to show Magnus the secret births of stars and speaking in wonder of the incomprehensible voids between them. Together they had plotted the course of future crusades, and laughed as they imagined the campaigns that would one day reach out into the fathomless gulfs between galaxies.

'There is nothing impossible to him who will try,' his father had said when Magnus had spoken of the nigh-impossibility of reaching beyond the halo stars. 'No one yet alive will see it, but when humankind can fly as we fly, can see as we see, *then* the greatest prize of all will be within their grasp.'

'What prize could be greater than dominion of the galaxy?' Magnus had asked.

But his father had never given him an answer, turning away to hide His disappointment.

Memories centuries old now and ashes in his mind, but Magnus recalled them as though they were but moments ago.

'The old wounds are still fresh,' said Magnus.

'Sire?'

Magnus looked at the broken dome of the observatory and the swathes of refugees clustered around its base. Thousands of eyes were turned to face them.

'It is no small thing to walk within the walls of the Sanctum Imperialis,'

he said, climbing the steps towards the observatory. ***'I had not thought to***

be so affected. Foolish, I suppose, but it is hard to be here as an intruder

after… So many memories. For so long, Terra was the centre of my

existence, but this is no longer the house of my father.'

Magnus led them higher, his gaze fixed on the triumphal archway that led within. He could feel the questioning stares of every refugee upon them.

Why were five Blood Angels climbing to the Great Observatory? Why were they not fighting on the walls with their brothers? The rawness of thoughts here was hard to block: desperation, terror, bewilder ment, and the beginnings of a numb acceptance that this was a battle that could not be won.

If only you knew…

He heard the name of the Lord of Angels and his sons shouted like a talisman before them.

'Sanguinius!'

'The Archangel's beloved!'

'Blood Angels!'

'Glory to the Ninth!'

The people in their path moved aside, bowing or dropping to their knees with palms together, whispered words spilling from their lips in repeating mantras.

'The Emperor protects…'

'What are they doing?' asked Atrahasis.

'Praying,' said Magnus.

'Why?'

'Because in times of woe, people crave saviours. My father is so-

powerful He might as well be a god, and we are His sons, avatars of a god

and worthy of the same devotion.'

Yet even as the words left his lips, he knew there was something hollow, something *wrong* about them, though he couldn't say for sure what it was.

'It disturbs me to see such behaviour,' said Atrahasis.

'Why?' asked Ahriman.

'It is regression. To seek saviours is to abrogate any responsibility to enact change. If a thing needs doing, it should be done. If action is to be taken, take it. You don't wait for anyone else to do it for you.'

'Spoken like a true Raptora,' said Menkaura.

'Doesn't it sicken you?' snapped Ahriman's equerry. 'We know so much now – secrets and technologies so advanced they would appear as magic to our forefathers, wisdom and philosophy so enlightening that such wilful embrace of ignorance and superstition is inexcusable.'

'Ease your choler, Atrahasis,' said Ahriman.

Atrahasis nodded, and kept his gaze fixed on the steps as they climbed.

Eventually Magnus stepped onto the great esplanade before the observatory and craned his neck to look up towards the mighty dome. Drifts of ashen smoke obscured the circuit of columns below the dome, and only its very edge winked gold far, far above.

‘It’s magnificent,’ said Amon, his gaze following the outline of the great archway. Dressed in agate and onyx, every stone was carved with star maps, most to places navigable from Terra, some to places most assuredly not.

‘Almost the equal of the celestial chambers in the Pyramid of Photep.’

‘Almost,’ said Magnus with a grin.

‘Yes, it is magnificent,’ agreed Ahriman, looking towards a sky that was lousy with battle ejecta, e-mag squalls and flickering atomic explosions.

‘But why are we here? With all the debris and shelling from low orbit, we won’t see anything beyond the atmosphere just now.’

‘We are not here to look up,’ said Magnus, ***‘but to pass below.’***

‘What does that mean?’ asked Amon.

‘There is a hidden place here where past and future have co-mingled since primordial times,’ said Magnus. ***‘My father once called it a domestication of one of the materium’s anomalies. A pulled thread in the fabric of time, a scab on the skin of space. We will travel the low roads that thread the liminal spaces beneath its foundations.’***

‘Does this place have a name?’ asked Ahriman.

‘It does, a name it owned before the first men came here and raised a roof above it,’ said Magnus. ***‘They called it the Hall of Leng.’***

The space within the observatory was so colossally vast as to defy the notion of it being an interior. The dome was fully four kilometres in diameter, its underside coffered in bronze and ouslite panels partially obscured by a trapped cloud layer that twisted like an ocean maelstrom in the twitching suspensor fields. Even to Magnus, who had designed the exacting dimensions of the Pyramid of Photep, it seemed inconceivable that such a feat of engineering could have been achieved by mortals.

Shell detonations, graser impacts and tectonic shifts from the sheer volume of ordnance landing on the surrounding landscape had cracked portions of the dome in a dozen places. Thick columns of variegated light speared down to paint the terrazzo floor and walls like reflections in a deep-water cistern. The entire circumference of the observatory's wall was carved with vivid frescoes depicting the greatest pioneers of astronomy and their myriad achievements.

Magnus saw alcove shrines and statues dedicated to Aganice, Zarkov, the Heliocentric Apostate, Hypatia, the Scanian Alchymist, Zulema, the Mother of Comets, and hundreds more: a legacy of scientific achievement without which none of them would be standing here.

The ancient ocular artefact the Emperor had wrought to scry distant galaxies swayed high above the centre of the dome on broken chains like the corpse of an enormous mantis wrought from spun silver, smoked glass and gold. The obsidian speculum in its curiously angled lens apparatus had been shattered at the first impact of weaponry, and most of the device's impossibly complex workings hung like loops of intestinal tract from its split casing.

Magnus' heart broke to see the damage, knowing that nothing else of its kind had ever existed, and never would again.

When this is all over, will the prize be worth the price paid?

Yet for all its wonder and the scientific achievements of the men and women celebrated on the walls, the observatory was now simply a place to shelter from the war.

In its day it had been a place of quiet wonder, a gathering place for seekers of wisdom and discoverers of truth, but it had become a noisome, reeking vault. Tens of thousands of refugees obscured the great star map carved into the floor, and the statues of those who had made the Imperium possible looked out over a tumultuous sea of frightened people who cared nothing for their legacies.

Magnus strode through the centre of the crowds, drawn towards a distant statue and alcove. As on the steps, the weight of expectation that settled upon him was profound.

Despite the deceptions he worked within the minds of the mortals crammed inside the Palace walls, he wondered if some deep-buried part of their brains still knew they were in the presence of a god. His image was obscured, but the human psyche could still sense that a being of great power walked among them.

They saw Angels of Death, gene-forged warriors of the Emperor's own lineage, the immortal god-warriors. But more than that, Magnus felt the presence of an insidious shadow at the edge of that belief, and now understood the strange hollowness he had felt on the steps.

'They are beginning to fear us,' he whispered.

'They are right to fear us,' replied Ahriman. 'For we are mighty and terrible, and our power is a fearful thing.'

'No, this is different,' said Magnus. ***'Once, they beheld us in awe and wonder, but not fear. It was understood that it was the duty of the strong to protect the weak. It always has been that way, ever since it was spoken of in the Iron Code. It has been a truth the best of us ought to embody.'***

He stopped before a tall statue of onyx and quartz, a grand representation of the great Kopernik and the first printed pages of his magnum opus. The way onwards was hidden here, a door only those with the wit to find it could open.

The Emperor had shown him it, and he suspected Sanguinius knew of it

too. Perhaps the Khan, for few were the secret ways he could not find.

Malcador and the Custodians would almost certainly know of it, but likely no others. He felt the nearby presence of the nagging stitch in reality that told him the way in was near, and lifted his hands up to tease it open with the prescribed psychic key.

Magnus looked back over his shoulder as the people nearest him backed away, eyes averted, just as the people on the grand stairs had done. But now he saw the secret truth at the heart of it: a nameless, metastasising fear coalescing in the bellies and minds of mortals.

That fear in the tales told on Terra would spread throughout what would be left of the Imperium in the wake of this war, growing deeper and darker with every retelling.

They will never trust us again.

As Magnus and his sons crossed the threshold of the Great Observatory, the three Iniquity - class Doomfires were looping a desperate course north-west, navigating by sight alone and following the Gilded Walk that ran from the Ultimate Gate, aiming for the gap between Widdershin's Tower and the Pillar of Unity.

Imperial Lightnings chased them, hounding them with air-to-air Skystrike missiles and autocannon fire. The Doomfires were slower by far, and would normally have been easily blown from the sky like wallowing void-whales, but nearby atmospheric squalls and the sheer density of structures crowding the Sanctum Imperialis made accurate targeting supremely difficult.

The first Iniquity was taken out as it banked hard around the Clanium Library, a Skystrike warhead detonating less than five metres from its portside wing. The bomber's blazing wreckage tumbled from the sky, vanishing into one of the abyssal canyons surrounding the Hegemon before exploding.

A second unleashed nearly its full complement of ordnance over the outer precincts of the Bhab Bastion before aiming its bulk mass towards the Helian

Tower in a suicidal strike on the structure's south-eastern flank.

Voids took the brunt of the bomb explosions, and close-in turrets hammered the Iniquity itself, but it had too much mass and too much speed to be entirely stopped.

The bomber ploughed into the Helian Tower and split it apart.

The wreckage drove in deep like the thrust of a dagger before the last of its munitions exploded, and the tower slumped over at its middle like a disembowelled fighter. Its upper reaches fell in an inexorably slow avalanche of torn stone and tumbling bodies. Two thousand adepts and civilian staff had been crammed within Helian, a structure never intended to endure such punishment. Not even Rogal Dorn's reinforced plating could withstand the impact of so devastating a missile.

Every single soul within the tower died and, more crucially, so too did their equipment.

Cascading vox-net failure within Bhab was total, resulting in an instantaneous blackout within the Sanctum Imperialis. All strategic overview of Exultant and Annapurna was lost, and all information flowing from the military heart of Terra ceased. For thirty tense minutes, the commanders of the Imperial Palace fought alone and isolated, blind, deaf and mute, until secondary relays allowed the re-establishment of command-and-control protocols.

The net was closing on the third Iniquity as its bombardier sought a target worthy of her ordnance. Eternity Gate and the golden heart of the Palace were too well protected by batteries of mobile gun-platforms, missile stations and barrage fields. Fresh squadrons of interceptors were closing fast from the eastern hangars beneath the Dome of Illumination.

Only one target presented itself, but before the bombardier could release her weapons, bracketing fire from the Hall of Weapons' defensive guns shredded the Iniquity's fuselage to blazing fragments.

The aircraft literally came apart in an expanding cloud of superheated vapour and steel confetti, but not before a pair of spiralling munitions tore loose from the pylon mounts on its spinning port wing.

Arcing down towards the Great Observatory.

Menkaura was the first to feel the blinding stab of prescience.

He dropped to his knees, hands pressed over his mirrored helm, a powerful psychic exclamation bursting from his mind.

+The fire from above, it burns everything. *It burns everything!* +

The mental pulse was so powerfully clear after the enforced necessity of speech that it sounded like a scream in an empty room. Each of them felt the power of Menkaura's vision searing within his skull. Seconds later, they all saw it.

A sea of hungry flames, burning spectral green.

Impossible heat and retina-searing brightness.

Flooding the observatory like ocean breakers against pale cliffs.

Screams swallowed as the air in mortal lungs was instantly burned away.

Flesh melting like snow before a flamer. Bones cracking and splitting.

Magnus looked up and saw a pair of black dots in the sky, growing steadily larger as they fell. He knew what they were, could all but read the serial numbers on their casings, the words of warning stencilled on the warheads, and the sigils of spite etched into their segmented bomb casings by Neverborn claws.

'Mark Eleven Muspell-class phosphex cluster bomb,' he said.

His sons all saw them, and their psychic vision of its effects spread throughout the observatory, leaping from mind to mind like a mental virus.

Heads turned skyward, but there were no screams among the doomed refugees, only a resigned acceptance of this final fate, like beasts milling in a slaughterhouse stockyard. The human capacity for terror can only endure so

much before it is dulled by constant horrors. Men and women clutched each other tightly, held their children, but not one got up to flee.

What would be the point? The choice was death here or death at the hands of some other uncaring weapon of the enemy. Such blunt acceptance of fate was anathema to Magnus, but the clarity of thought surrounding him was impossible to ignore. Yes, this was death, but at least it would be quick, not the drawn-out terror that ground souls to ash by constant loss.

The bright, instantaneous flash of an explosion was a far cleaner ending.

No, Magnus would not accept that.

The time for subtlety and subterfuge in this endeavour was at an end.

Magnus turned back to the invisible scar in the flesh of the world and slashed it open with a blow from his heqa staff that sounded like a canvas sail tearing. Shimmering, undersea light spilled from *elsewhere*, conjuring fleeting knives of memory, of shared joy and exploration.

A heady brew of emotions surged from the depths of his consciousness, wondrous and ripe with potential, but now irrevocably tainted with melancholy and the knowledge that such times were lost forever. A breath of wind carried the scent of polished lacquer, willow and cherry blossoms from the strange hall above.

'I have no time for such remembrances,' said Magnus, and stepped back into the observatory, looking up towards the falling bombs.

'My lord, there is nothing you can do for them!' cried Ahriman.

Magnus watched the warheads split apart, and three thousand phosphex bomblets were ejected from the main munition canister in a spiralling pattern to spread the impacts wider.

They slashed down like glowing green darts.

'We are never so inventive as when we seek to kill one another,' said Magnus.

One hundred metres above the floor the bomblets exploded in a rippling spiral of light, and the observatory was filled with falling clouds of killing fire. The deadly radiance engulfed the observatory, instantly burning the painted murals from the walls and incinerating countless scientific pioneers whose names would never be spoken again.

The atmosphere in the dome's upper reaches vanished with a thunderclap of vaporised air.

Now the refugees discovered there were terrors that might yet touch them, and the screaming began.

But just as swiftly it ceased and turned to cries of wonder.

The glowing ocean of emerald fire hung seething in the air, churning in a borealis of killing light. It raged and howled, a ravenous monster trapped and furious at being denied its feast of scorched meat and blackened bone.

It clawed and slithered like a living thing across an invisible barrier held above the refugees, a frenzied predator desperate to reach its prey.

Below it, Magnus stood with his arms upraised, his sons gathered around him.

Psychic might blazed from him as he wove inhumanly powerful forces overhead. No longer could he maintain his physical deception in the minds of those who beheld him, and he stood revealed in all his glory: a titan of gold and crimson, red of mane and ivory of horn. Lambent light that echoed the green of the phosphex burned in the cyclopean eye of Magnus. The power in that eye drank in the light and defied it.

Magnus was the Magister Templi of the Fellowships of Prospero. The formulae of the Raptora came as easily to him as breathing did to mortals, but the kine shield he held over the refugees was greater than even the masters of that Fellowship could conjure. And just as the innermost workings of the Raptora were his to command, so too were those of the Pyrae, the weavers of flame. Magnus remembered Khalophis during the Battle of Prospero, striding into battle within the god-machine *Canis Vertex*.

All the fire of the world was his to command, but not even he would have dared to tame so ferocious a conflagration.

Magnus clenched a fist and drove it up into the air.

The sky of phosphex dimmed fractionally. Its light was that of the dead, a ghostly green as unnatural as it was lethal. Magnus drew on his every reserve of power, but stopped short of employing that of the Neverborn.

It was his to command, all he had to do was *choose* to take it; that awesome, unstoppable power conjured from the darkest depths of the immaterium.

But such power was the province of the fell lords of the utterdark; he could not touch it without being instantly expelled from the Palace.

The telaethesic ward was attuned to exclude such unnatural energies and had thus far kept the Red Angel, the Pale King and the Phoenician from fully entering the Palace. Their forms were too corrupt, too tainted by that power for them to tread fully within the umbra of the Palace shields.

Instead, Magnus drew only from the well of his own abilities: a great and formidable power, but it was not depthless.

'My sons!' he cried as the sickly green fire slithered over the walls, tendrils of flame writhing and twisting as though searching for a weakness in the barrier. ***'The seventh enumeration, send me your power!'***

They surrounded him, a mandala formation, and their power poured into him.

How long Magnus stood with arms outstretched to consume the light he could not say.

'Time is its enemy!' he shouted, drawing strength from defiance. ***'Deny it sustenance and it must inevitably turn on itself.'***

Every second his sons empowered him and every second their combined power resisted its force drew strength from the attacking weapon. Slowly at

first, the howling green fire began to dim, and without fuel to sustain its growth, the shrieking light turned upon itself.

Nightmarish chemical reactions devised in a madman's lab drove the phosphex to desperately cannibalise its own unnatural structure in a frantic attempt to cling to life.

But against the immense power of Magnus the Red and his sons, it could never be enough.

The last embers of the phosphex faded as the chemical bonds at its heart finally broke apart. The fire guttered and the heat of its killing light was finally extinguished.

Magnus sighed and released his grip on the kine shield.

The dead phosphex fell to the floor of the observatory in a harmless, viscous rain that immediately began dissolving into pools of inert jelly.

Disbelieving cheers echoed from the walls as dimmed sparks of hope flared back to life in every refugee's heart.

Magnus sank to one knee, a splayed hand pressed hard to the napped-gem mosaic running around the circumference of the observ atory. His fingers rested on the image representing the twin ichthyo centaurs bearing Venus Anadyomene from the ocean.

'Aphros and Bythos Piscium,' said Magnus.

He remembered Horus showing him the same image in the astrological text their father had given him. Twenty signs to match His twenty sons.

Magnus had hidden his amusement at the primitive nature of the book, but enjoyed the purity of the memory.

He smiled to see the image on the floor, rippling light from the rent he had torn in reality making it seem as though the oceanic beasts had been given life and were bearing the renewed goddess from the ocean once again.

A hand touched his shoulder.

‘We need to go,’ said Ahriman.

Magnus nodded and drew himself up to his full, magnificent height.

A sea of faces drank in the light from his copper flesh, the inhuman nature of his being, but they beheld not the monster they had been told to fear, simply one of the Emperor’s sons, a warrior who had saved their lives.

‘My lord,’ pressed Ahriman. ‘Our enemies will know we are here now. We have to *go*.’

Magnus nodded, numb after so swift and violent an expenditure of power.

‘Yes. Go,’ he said, half turning to the secret way he had opened beneath the Hall of Leng.

Amon, Menkaura and Atrahasis stepped through to gasps of astonishment from the refugees, but Ahriman lingered.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘Why what?’

‘Why did you save these people?’

‘You would have left them to die?’

‘They will probably die anyway when Lupercal takes the Palace,’ said Ahriman.

‘Maybe, maybe not. All I knew was that I could not allow them to perish in the fire when I could save them. In truth, until I stepped back into the dome, I did not know what I would do.’

‘Perhaps proximity to the first shard of your soul is affecting you more than any of us thought possible,’ ventured Ahriman.

‘Perhaps,’ said Magnus with a hopeful smile. ***‘It is the first and best part of me.’***

With Ahriman at his side, Magnus set foot on the Low Roads.

Magnus saves the refugees in the observatory.

BOOK FOUR

UNDER PALACE

TEN

Predators and Prey

Light from beneath the dark lake rippled on the stalactite-clustered ceiling of the immense cavern like undersea shadows. Crystal seams threading the rocky ceiling glittered like distant stars, so very unlike the current view from Terra's surface. At first, Alivia had thought Malcador had brought her to one of the Palace's underground aquifers, but when she had seen the villas of pale stone at the water's edge, she knew this place served another purpose.

Something about the villas seemed *off*, but it wasn't until Malcador led her between them to a circular plaza that she realised what was unsettling about them. Each was scaled for beings far larger than mortals, larger even than the warriors of the Legiones Astartes. She counted twenty of them – surely no coincidence in *that* number – and the colourful mosaic forming the plaza itself depicted something geometrically abstract, like the murals popular with Achaemenid nobles.

'These villas were built for the primarchs, weren't they?' she asked.

Malcador nodded. ‘The Emperor imagined they would grow here and learn the skills He needed them to possess before the conquest of the galaxy began in earnest.’

‘They never did though, did they?’

‘No, *she* saw to that.’

Alivia didn’t need to ask who *she* was. The Emperor was the gene-father of the primarchs, but only Erda could be thought of as their mother.

A twisted, barbed-wire bitch of a mother, but still…

‘Have they *ever* been used?’

‘Not really,’ said Malcador. ‘At least, not for the purpose for which they were intended.’

‘There’s thousands of refugees up top you could shelter down here.’

‘Both the Khan and the Archangel proposed that, but Valdor would not allow it.’

‘I’m guessing that wherever we are is too close to Him for Constantin’s liking.’

‘That, among other reasons.’

‘But there’s been *someone* here,’ said Alivia, walking a circuit around the plaza and feeling the presence of a past shade. ‘Something power ful, something *broken*. And recently too.’

‘Your abilities are getting stronger.’

Alivia shook her head. ‘No, I’ve felt almost nothing since we arrived on Terra. Even deep beneath Molech, I could feel the Emperor’s presence, but now… it’s like He’s not even here.’

‘He is most assuredly here, but as I said, this siege is being fought in more realms than you can imagine,’ said Malcador. ‘Lupercal might already be seated upon the throne were the Emperor not fighting His own war.’

‘So why are you and I here?’

‘Do you remember when I talked about forgiveness before we set out?’

‘You said it would deprive the enemy of one of their most potent weapons.’

‘And so it may, but first, let me ask you something.’

Alivia’s eyes narrowed. ‘Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like this?’

‘Neither of us will, I suspect. Honesty is always hard.’

‘Honesty hasn’t always been my strong suit, but ask away.’

‘Are you a good person, Alivia Sureka? Can you look at yourself in the mirror, see past the many masks you have worn over the long millennia to the very core of your being and say, without equivocation, that you are a good person?’

The question surprised Alivia. She hadn’t known what to expect, but this most assuredly wasn’t it. She waited for any clarification, some guidance on what he might be expecting from her, but nothing more was forthcoming.

She moved to the edge of the lake, looking out over the smooth black

waters.

‘Am I *good*?’ she said. ‘That’s a pretty broad question.’

‘It really isn’t. And you’re stalling.’

‘Of course I’m stalling. I’ve lived a *very* long life and no one gets to live this long without having done some things they’re ashamed of. I’ve killed people, I’ve killed *lots* of people, betrayed friends and lovers, lied, cheated–’

‘And stolen,’ said Malcador with the barest hint of a smile. ‘That storybook you’re carrying in your coat pocket, the one with the old fairy tales. You stole that from a church.’

‘I was getting to that,’ snapped Alivia, bending to stir the water with her fingers. ‘What’s your point? Are *you* a good person?’

‘By any conventional reckoning, no. Like you, I have betrayed those closest to me, and though it has been many years since I have taken a life, I have sanctioned deeds by others that saw appalling slaughters.’

‘So, we’ve both done bad things.’

‘ *Terrible* things. Things that would, were they laid before any theoretical higher power of judgement, see us consigned to the deepest hells of the ancients.’

‘I’m not sure where you’re going with this, but I don’t think I like it.’

‘My point, Alivia, is that despite all the many terrible acts we have ourselves done or set in motion, we are *within* the walls of the Emperor’s Palace.’

‘Wait, is this some long-winded way of saying you’re throwing me out?’

Malcador gave a weak laugh and said, ‘No, because for what it is worth, our many sins were committed in the name of something *good*.’

‘An evil act, even when you do it in the name of something good, is still evil.’

‘True,’ said Malcador, lifting his gaze out over the lake as though he expected something to rise from its depths. ‘But I fear we do not have the luxury of time to delve into the semantics of such a debate as deeply as it needs.’

‘We don’t?’ said Alivia, looking around.

‘No, because you were right.’

‘About what?’

‘Someone powerful did dwell here for a time. Or at least a portion of him.’

‘Who?’

‘Until recently, Magnus.’

‘Magnus? As in *the Red*. The primarch?’

‘Yes, and by my reckoning, he will be here very soon.’

The engine of the venerable Taurox had finally given out on the upper approach circuit of the tiered crater of the Investiary. Not that it could have gone farther anyway – the processional ramp was choked with rubble and the Weeping Fountains shed tears no more.

‘You are sure this is the place?’ asked Bjarki, climbing down from the Taurox as its seized motor juddered like the death rattle of its Nocturnean namesake. ‘Even a wyrd-blinded *gothii* would see this is not where that power came from.’

They had all felt it: the cold stab of a monstrous psychic event deep in the heart of the Sanctum Imperialis. Yet with every kilometre they travelled, all had felt the distance between them and its source increase.

‘I’m sure,’ said Promeus. ‘Malcador’s message was clear. Make for the centre of the Investiary and wait.’

‘Wait for what?’ asked Atok Abidemi, unsheathing his great, toothed blade.

‘He didn’t say.’

It took the legionaries two hours to descend the broken steps towards the base of the amphitheatre, where the great titanoliths of the Emperor’s sons had been explosively brought down. Only two of the sixteen that had been allowed to remain were left standing.

One was unmistakable, the stoic and immovable Dorn, but it took seeing the dust-covered XX on the base of the statue opposite for Promeus to recognise it was the once veiled figure of impenetrable Alpharius.

The floor of the Investiary, like the wide ramp approaching it, was filled with vast chunks of dusty marble hewn from the great mountain in Attica that overlooked the site of Miltiades' great victory. The debris might have been mistaken for the aftermath of an avalanche but for the massive chunks of veined stone clearly shaped by the hands of mortals. Promeus saw the shattered visage of a huge face that might once have been Guilliman, a hand clenched mockingly into a fist, and upon one plinth, two vast and trunkless legs that ended mid-shin. A sword with a hawk-winged hilt lay beneath half a helmet staring up at the tortured sky, but to whom either had once belonged Promeus could not say.

Sadness touched him at the sight of the Emperor's sons brought low.

He turned to speak to Bjarki, but the Rune Priest and his brethren had already moved off, leaving Promeus alone. Likewise, the Salamanders moved purposefully through the rubble towards a shattered plinth on the far side of the arena-like space.

At first he didn't understand what they were doing until he saw to which plinths they drew near. Abidemi dropped to his knees in silent contemplation before the plinth upon which the gene-sire of the XVIII Legion had once stood. Only a single, booted foot remained of Vulkan, the rest of his body lying shattered beyond repair in the sand of the amphitheatre.

Bjarki and his brothers stood defiantly before the broken remains of Leman Russ, whose body had sheared off diagonally at the waist. The hairs on the back of Promeus' neck stood up as Bjarki threw back his head and loosed a ululating pack-howl. The plaintive sound rose as Widdowsyn and Rackwulf added their voices, and the sublime acoustics of the Investiary carried their vengeance to the heavens and pierced even the constant drumbeat of war.

The vestiges of his former life as a remembrancer urged him to secure a better look at this ritual, but if he had learned anything during his time as a hostage of the VI Legion, it was that their grief was a deeply personal thing.

To intrude on it uninvited would be lethally unwise.

Instead, he sat on a shattered fragment of stone, hoping he wasn't desecrating the remains of a primarch, and waited. He rested his head in his hands, one warm and clammy, the other cold and smooth.

He seemed to recall hearing that infiltrators had destroyed the statues of the Investiary, but the tactical sense of that eluded him. To have so deeply penetrated the Palace only to wreak symbolic devastation seemed somehow… *petty*.

Perhaps it had been a message? Or a goading challenge?

He supposed he would never know, and despite the urgency of Malcador's message and the renewed rumble of a ferocious artillery duel many kilometres north on the Ultimate Wall, Promeus felt his eyelids drooping and his breathing deepen.

The crunching sound of footsteps jolted him from his doze.

'They should tear this one down,' said Svafnir Rackwulf, looking up at Alpharius.

'Why don't they?' added Widdowsyn.

'It's just a statue,' said Atok Abidemi, leading his Salamanders back to join them. 'Besides, the traitors are destroying enough of the Palace without us helping them. And a time is coming when every scrap of ordnance will be needed at the walls. How galling would it be for a gate or tower to fall for the lack of explosives spent demolishing this?'

Bjarki shrugged. 'Salamanders and their pragmatism,' he said with a grin.

'So what now?' asked Igen Gargo. 'Atok? You led us this far. Where now?'

Abidemi nodded and knelt beside Promeus. 'You told us you could follow the spoor of the Red Sorcerers. So are they here?'

'No,' said Promeus.

‘Then why are *we* here?’ demanded Barek Zytos, as much of Abidemi as Promeus.

He let their questions drift over him, hearing the faint sound of distant voices on the wind, channelled through the broken stonework and brought down through the acoustic confluence of the amphitheatre’s high tiers.

Isolated from the fighting on the walls, the din of battle was muted below –

the recent artillery duel notwithstanding – but the voices were as clear as if their speakers were right next to him.

‘Put fire on that outpost. Stalk-tanks in the rubble!’

‘Tower Helican is down! I repeat, Tower Helican is down!’

‘Push the Seventeenth Pan-Pac down there. Hold the gate at all costs!’

‘KILL ’EM ALL!’

Dozens more intruded on his thoughts, the stray comments of Terra’s warriors echoing down into the Investiary and scratching the surface of his mind. He rubbed his temples, feeling a pressure growing behind his eyes and a taste of tin in his mouth.

Promeus stood, recognising the sensation.

He’d felt it on Kamiti Sona, the instant before Ahzek Ahriman and his sorcerers had ripped some kind of psychic gateway through the red ruin of a madman’s body.

He cast his gaze around the arena, and his growing fear eased as he saw a shimmering, golden light near the centre of the amphitheatre. It danced like an endlessly repeating image of a lightning bolt captured on a broken picter at the instant of its birth.

‘Do you see that?’ he asked.

‘See what?’ asked Bjarki, his voice sounding like it had crossed vast gulfs to reach him.

‘The lightning,’ said Promeus, picking a path through the rubble.

He barely felt them following. His attention was solely fixed on the lightning. It drew him like a moth to a lure, but it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It wavered in his sight, like a scratch on the glass of reality – too bright to look at directly, too faint to be seen except out of the corner of his eye.

It was a beckoning call, a summons to be willingly answered.

He skirted the massive form of a primarch’s sundered chest – whose he didn’t know – and even through the dense stone, the shimmering form of the lightning was visible.

At last he reached the centre of the amphitheatre and stood before the shattered remains of an upraised arm, sheared away at the shoulder. Strands of rusted rebar hung like sinew from where explosives had blasted the mighty limb from its body.

The remains of what might have been a stonework cloak clung to the shorn arm, and from the carven scales upon it, the once-owner’s identity was clear.

‘Lord Vulkan,’ said Abidemi, a low undercurrent of anger in his voice.

Split from the top of the shoulder was the titanic skull of the firedrake Kesare, a recreation of the beast slain by the primarch as a youth and wrought into his armour.

The sculptor had worked wonders on the marble, and even though the scale of it was monstrously exaggerated for the statue, Promeus shuddered to think of the beast in life.

The impact with the ground had split the skull from the marble armour and it lay like a vast unearthed fossil with its jaws spread wide. And now, finally, Promeus saw the source of the light, a shimmer of golden radiance emanating from its jaws.

A crack in the world, teased open for a fragile moment in time.

‘A passage to the Underverse,’ said Bjarki, his psychic senses now aware of the light.

Promeus shook his head. ‘No. That’s not what this is.’

‘Then what is it?’

‘What do you both see?’ asked Abidemi, following their gaze into the great drake’s maw. His red eyes narrowed, and Promeus guessed even the stolid Salamander sensed something was askew.

‘It’s a passage,’ said Promeus, ‘but not to your Underverse.’

‘What are you two talking about?’ snapped Barek Zytos. ‘We cannot stand idle as the fate of the planet is decided elsewhere.’

‘What is it you see?’ pressed Abidemi.

Promeus reached out to the light, holding to the image of Malcador’s face and the message that had brought them here. In response, the illumination swelled around them.

He fell to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks.

And, one by one, the Astartes knelt in reverence as the gene-craft that had gone into their creation responded to the radiance of their maker.

The passage of the Low Roads had tested them all.

That these tunnels were no natural geology was clear. No earthly orogenic movement or tectonic compressional energies had wrought this strange labyrinth beneath the Palace.

‘The Emperor did not build these passages,’ said Ahriman.

‘No, He did not,’ replied Magnus. ***‘At least I don’t think so. He may have***

expanded them, but He was not their creator.'

'Who built them then?' said Amon, running a hand across the strangely glistening tiled walls and leaving a faint bioluminescent sheen behind.

'My father often talked of the Men of Leng and their curious sciences that sought to unpick the weave of the universe,' said Magnus. ***'Perhaps these tunnels are theirs.'***

Atrahasis had said nothing since they had stepped from beneath the dome of the Great Observatory, but now he chose to speak: 'To walk in such places goes against the workings of the world.'

Menkaura grinned. 'Like wandering behind the scenes of a Theatrica Imperialis set and seeing that the reality presented to the world is little more than a cheap plasterboard facade.'

The words were said lightly, but Magnus felt their unease and, privately, shared it.

To warriors of the Fellowships, to see beyond the veil without the protection of their psychic masteries was unnerving to say the least. The full extent of the Emperor's telaethesic ward was yet unknown, and to travel via such arcane means without their full powers was anathema to them.

Magnus reached out, briefly touching his sons' minds to ease their trepidation.

He felt Ahriman's growing fear of the changes being wrought on the Legion. His Chief Librarian had always feared the flesh change. Little wonder since he had lost his twin to its uncontrollable hyper-mutations. The fear that their present course would inevitably lead to such a fate for them all but consumed him, though he hid it well.

Menkaura's mind was a fortress, but one with its gates unbarred to Magnus.

The seer's mind was aflame with thoughts of betrayal and the fear of what his brothers would do were they to discover his past treacheries. Magnus cared

nothing for Menkaura's deceptions, seeing only a future of endless torment and flaming eyes within eyes.

Grief touched him as he skimmed the minds of Amon and Atrahasis.

He saw their deaths, but could make sense of neither.

Magnus delved no deeper into the thoughts of his sons, for he knew that to prise open their very hearts would lead only to disappointment. Even a cursory brush with their minds had revealed all the petty jealousies, resentments and insecurities their lineage and training was intended to erase.

And yet he loved them still.

They were his sons, and even after all they had endured in his name, they remained loyal.

The thought consoled him as they moved deeper into this strange network, and a prescient sense of *imminence* filled him, like the moment before a storm breaks.

Enclosed in these unnatural tunnels, Magnus had no idea how long it would take them to reach their destination, a place in which he had never set foot, but knew as intimately as if he had built it himself.

With every step he took, the more these memories that were not memories,

but experiences belonging to another, began intruding on his psyche.

Another part of *him*, but also *not* him.

Memories of peace as he walked the shores of a frigid lake, of contentment as he browsed books long thought lost, and the simple pleasure of conversations with friends of old. To feel there was a portion of his own life he had not lived cut his soul with a profound sense of loss. This was a life wholly distinct from him, and yet still a part of the one he was experiencing in this exact moment.

Flying the Great Ocean had shown Magnus the truth of time's fictive lattice and its multifaceted nature. To look only upon one seam of the spiralling flow of entropy and change was to deny a soul the wonder of all the others.

And yet there was an immediacy of being so lost in the present that all else faded…

As if in response to the memory of these un-memories, the tunnel widened and the soft glow of impossible starlight brightened its walls.

'We're here,' he said, and he felt their relief at being able to step off the Low Roads.

Magnus heard the sound of icy water lapping on a shingled shore of black sand and felt the airy openness of a high-ceilinged space before him. A mingled sense of excitement and trepidation filled him, but he quelled his euphoric anticipation at being reunited with the last and best part of him.

They were, after all, deep within his father's fortress.

Any living souls they might find beyond were the enemy.

Who knew what might await them here? The Saturnine Gambit had shown that the defenders of the Palace were cunning beyond any measure Lupercal and the Lord of Iron had believed possible.

For all Magnus knew, an entire Order of the Silent Sisterhood together with a Shield Host of Valdor's Custodians might be lying in wait for them.

He didn't think so, but to prick his pride, his mind conjured the sight of Lupercal's First Captain lying in a lake of his own blood following the disastrous assault beneath the Saturnine Wall. Once so proud, but now a blade-gutted shell, Ezekyle Abaddon had been broken almost beyond repair and his soul now drifted lost and forlorn on an ocean of despair.

So many prideful warriors, so sure of their great victory.

All now dead.

He remembered mocking their supreme self-confidence as they departed.

Was he any different?

Magnus stepped into the cavern beneath the Palace, smelling the achingly sharp tang of the lake, the smell of wet rock, and bitingly cold air. The cavern roof glittered with snaking veins of crystalline light, and a series of overscaled villas were set back a little distance from the water's edge.

He recognised them, though he had never set so much as a foot within.

His fear of the Legio Custodes and null-maidens evaporated as he saw that no such army of ambush awaited them.

Two figures sat at a table by the lake, a man robed in black and a woman wearing a military flak coat. The woman was unknown to him, but he felt echoes of the great span of time to which she had borne witness within the labyrinthine pathways of her guarded psyche.

Had he the time, hers would have been an interesting mind to explore.

The black-robed man was as familiar to him as a brother – more so, for he had more in common with him than the brothers bound to him by the gene-craft of his father. They had shared minds, flown the secret paths of the Great Ocean, and learned the wondrous secrets of its deepest reaches together.

Once they had shared a bond deeper and more resonant than any biological one, but time and tide had forced them to opposite sides of the great schism that now sundered the Imperium.

The woman helped the man to his feet as they stepped out, an unnecessary labour for his veneer of vulnerability was just as illusory as the nature of time in the Great Ocean.

He felt their fear, their awe, and their… *what*… *hope*?

The black-robed man smiled in welcome.

'Welcome home, Magnus,' said Malcador.

ELEVEN

Blind Man's Mate

Home.

The word sent a jolt of pain through Magnus.

To a being unbound by the laws of the physical realm, the word was almost meaningless, or so he had thought until it flew from Malcador's lips to pierce his heart like an arrow.

Prospero had always been Magnus' home, ever since he had been cast from Terra as a youth. Isolated from the species' birthrock, that distant world was also home to a remote sect of scholars and seers whose lives were spent in development of their nascent psychic potential.

Even as an orphan adrift, his powers were greater than theirs.

Prospero had been a dream, a place of joy and light, where he had grown to become the best and brightest of them all.

But now he saw it for what it truly was: a hiding place.

There he could grow and develop without fear of being eclipsed in glory, in a place where he would never be outshone or think his accomplishments cheap in the face of another's greatness.

One word had unlocked that understanding. One simple word.

Malcador was too canny not to have known the effect that word would have upon him, and it unsettled Magnus to realise how easily it had passed his guard and how deep a chord it struck. Even now, Malcador was playing his mind games.

Magnus pushed away painful thoughts of Prospero and strode across the black sands.

So like that of Isstvan V.

He had not fought at the explosive inception of Lupercal's war, but he had lived it through the psychometry of others. He had trod the blood-soaked fields of the Urgall Depression in ways more vivid than even those who had fought and died there.

'It's the Sigillite,' said Atrahasis in disbelief. 'We should kill him.'

'No,' said Magnus. ***'There is to be no killing but on my word.'***

The Thousand Sons spread out before him, a four-man echelon with their bolters aimed unerringly at Malcador's head, though the Sigillite seemed unperturbed by the enemy legionaries moving to surround him. From the woman, Magnus sensed only surprise, not the fear he might have expected.

The table between her and Malcador was laid with a silver ewer, a platter of fruit and a classic, circular regicide board. A simple set with only the most basic wooden representations of the pieces.

Magnus scanned the board in the blink of an eye, running through the myriad permutations of future moves and likely counters.

'You are one move away from defeat,' he said.

Alivia watched the primarch of the Thousand Sons approach with prideful strides, feeling her heart beating wildly in her chest. She had met four primarchs in her long life: Horus Lupercal, Guilliman, Corax, and one whose name she had sworn never to speak.

None of them affected her quite like Magnus.

To look upon such beings – she refused to call them demigods or any such nonsense – was to see the terrible power of science and magic unfettered by any notions of ethics or caution. The birth of the primarchs was the power to create monsters.

She had been awed by their abilities, but she had always seen past their mythologising. They were mighty, yes, but they were not immortal. They were not unkillable.

Magnus was something else entirely.

His body had long since surrendered to the metaphysics of his creation, neither wholly flesh and blood, nor yet something of the immaterium. An amber haze drifted up from the flesh of his limbs, like heated ingots removed from a furnace, and the red of his hair was so vivid it hurt to look upon. The moulded plates of his armour gleamed with reflections without source, and ghostly images slid across the slick surfaces of his horned breastplate.

Alivia felt his infinite gaze sweep across her, and the sense of the terrible truths behind that baleful eye sent a spasm of nausea through her. She remembered defiantly meeting the gaze of Horus beneath Molech, but where the Warmaster had embodied raw strength, Magnus was an ocean of limitless ferocity contained by a lone, straining dam of fraying humanity.

'You are one move away from defeat,' said Magnus, and even his voice was heavy with the sense that, but for his restraint, it might obliterate her with a spiteful syllable. ***'I believe she is positioning her Divinitarch for a***

Blind Man's Mate.'

'It looks that way,' agreed Malcador, 'but my Tetrarch stands ready to spring a Traitor's Gambit.'

'Risky,' said Magnus. ***'Very risky.'***

Malcador smiled. 'Indeed. And against a more ruthless opponent I would not attempt it. No offence, Alivia.'

'None taken,' she said, struggling to keep her voice even. 'I prefer cards anyway. Way easier to cheat.'

'Your name is Alivia?' said Magnus, turning his attention to her. She flinched at the intensity of his gaze, but only a little, feeling like a paralysed gazelle before the hunting lion.

She nodded and said, ‘Alivia Sureka. I don’t need to ask who *you* are.’

‘What strange fate leads you to be playing Regicide with the Sigillite of Terra on the calm shores of this lake while my brothers lay siege above?’

‘He asked me to come.’

‘Why?’

‘I have absolutely no idea,’ said Alivia. ‘He’s not the best at giving straight answers.’

Magnus grinned. ***‘No, he is not. Indeed, he is not.’***

Malcador sat back at the board and planted his staff in the sand like a banner pole. He held out his other hand, offering Magnus the seat opposite.

‘What say we finish this game?’ said Malcador.

‘It is all but concluded,’ replied Magnus.

‘Nothing is certain in the late game.’

‘Some things are,’ said Magnus, turning his gaze upon the seat opposite Malcador. Its dimensions stretched with a groan of twisting iron as it swelled to accommodate his inhuman proportions. ***‘Besides, I do not wish to play you again. Your moves and ploys are all known to me, and our games always ended in stalemate.’***

Malcador rose from the table and said, ‘Then play Alivia.’

Alivia looked from Malcador to the board and back again. Before Magnus’ arrival, she had been taking a beating from the Sigillite, and now he was offering her his superior position. Victory was almost certain from here, but

against a primarch…

'A mortal?' snorted Magnus. ***'What would be the point?'***

'Alivia may surprise you, she is quite gifted.'

Their arrogance irked Alivia, so she took Malcador's seat across from Magnus.

'Sure, why not? How often do you get an opportunity like this?'

Magnus regarded her with more scrutiny, no doubt suspicious of Malcador's motives. She didn't blame him; she would be just as sceptical.

'Very well, I will indulge you this last pantomime,' said Magnus.

Malcador stood behind Alivia and said, 'You studied the game I played against Dume?'

'You played against Narthan Dume?' said Alivia, craning her neck to face Malcador.

'Once, yes, in the heady days before the Panpacific descended into a nightmare.'

Magnus nodded. ***'I replayed that game in my mind for months to understand how he beat Dume. In the end I was forced to conclude that Dume's genius had already fallen into madness by the time he made that last desperate gambit with his Empress. Now, I will play your game, but enough with symbolism and deflections, you know why I am here.'***

'A number of possibilities suggest themselves,' said Malcador.

'Such as?'

Alivia reached out to move one of her Citizen pieces forward, an inconsequential move, a delaying tactic.

‘Vengeance for Prospero?’ she suggested.

Magnus slid his last remaining fortress across the board to counter Alivia’s opposing Primarch. Another delaying move in an irrelevant portion of the board. Scanning the pieces, she saw that only the movement of the Ecclesiarch and the Tetrarch in the Widdershin’s section of the board was of any importance.

‘Would I be unjustified in such a motive?’ asked Magnus. ***‘I did nothing wrong, and my world was razed, my sons butchered by Russ’ dogs, and a wealth of learning burned to ash.’***

‘That was not my intent,’ said Malcador, and his sadness was genuine.

‘Nor was it His.’

‘Your* intent *is meaningless,’ snapped Magnus. ***‘You are still responsible. You sent Russ and the Custodians to my world with blades bared. What did you* think *they would do?’***

‘Perhaps you could ask Horus,’ said Malcador. ‘His hands are stained red with the blood of your sons as much as mine. I say that not to pass any responsibility, I own that decision, and the doom of Prospero is entirely my burden to shoulder. I sent the Wolves. I gave them their orders, but I did not foresee how their mission might be co-opted by a single word.’

Magnus shook his head. ***‘The small perturbations we miss or ignore, the tiny flaws we regard as inconsequential… they have far-reaching consequences. Didn’t you teach me that?’***

‘I did,’ said Malcador sadly. ‘If only you had truly understood what it meant.’

Malcador raised a palm to head off Magnus’ anger.

‘Do not mistake my meaning,’ said the Sigillite. ‘We failed you utterly. We didn’t tell you all you needed to know. We gave you the tools to forge your own reality, but didn’t make clear what the cost of crossing certain lines would be. The failure is ours entirely, mine and the Emperor’s, not yours.

But it doesn’t change where we stand now. What matters is what happens here, right now in this moment.’

***‘What is the point of this confession, Malcador? Do you want my forgiveness, is that it? My Legion was all but destroyed, and the dread powers that even now hollow out Horus like a wasting sickness gather like carrion around my sons. Around* me .’**

‘My words were not a confession.’

‘Then what were they?’

Malcador leaned heavily on his staff with a sigh, and Alivia saw to the true heart of the man. Despite everything, despite all the power he possessed, all the grand stratagems measured in the spans of millennia, he was *tired*.

His long life was almost at an end and he knew it.

‘It is a last attempt to speak to the Magnus I knew before this age of madness,’ said Malcador. ‘You were always the best of us in so many ways.

You had vision none of your brothers ever came close to matching. Each of them embodies greatness in his own way, but none could see as far or conceptualise the infinite possibilities of existence as you were able to. Not even I could envision the things you dreamed.’

‘And yet here we are,’ said Magnus. ***‘Enemies.’***

Malcador shook his head. ‘That clay is still soft, not yet fixed in shape, and the heat of this kiln has yet to render any transformation permanent.’

Magnus turned his attention to the game. Alivia did likewise and was surprised to see the configuration of the board had changed. They had been moving pieces instinctively, neither fully aware of the act or in full conscious awareness of their closing stratagems.

The Traitor’s Gambit was no longer possible, but neither was Blind Man’s Mate, the necessary pieces scattered and dispersed, with the portions of the board Magnus had dismissed as irrelevant now assuming far greater importance.

In this new alignment, the white Primarch faced off against the black Emperor, and all other pieces had faded into the background, like the singers of the chorus, melting into the curtained shadows of the wings, leaving only the leading actors in the spotlight.

‘The next move of the Primarch piece will decide the outcome of the game,’ she said.

‘You’re right, she is gifted,’ said Magnus. ***‘And so the late game reveals itself.’***

Alivia held her breath. ‘It’s your move,’ she said.

‘Do you think* this *,’ said Magnus, placing a finger on the Primarch piece and sweeping his other hand around him, ***‘any of this means anything?***

You both know this game is meaningless. It is nothing more than childish symbolism engineered to prime my thought processes, fire certain synaptic connections within my psyche, and not-so-subtly arrange the levers in my mind to your purposes.’

‘I admit to a certain level of theatricality,’ said Malcador. ‘But its message is no less true.’

‘And what message is that?’

‘That it’s not too late to alter the course of the game,’ said Alivia, placing a

fingertip on the head of her Emperor piece. ‘That the next move you make will decide whether this Emperor falls or retakes the board.’

Magnus nodded and removed his finger from the Primarch. He sat back, coolly regarding Alivia. Looking past him to the armed warriors at his back, Alivia felt their impatience as they watched their gene-sire parley with their sworn enemy like an old friend.

‘You said there were a number of possibilities as to why I had come

here,’ said Magnus, abruptly returning to an earlier moment in their conversation.

‘I did, yes.’

‘Alivia here suggested vengeance for Prospero was one, what are the

others?’

‘The missing piece of your soul.’

Magnus snapped his fingers. ***‘There it is. Yes, the missing piece of my***

soul, **the last and best part of me .** ***When Russ broke me across his knee, I***

cried out to my sons, and together we cast ourselves into the Great Ocean

in search of refuge. It cost me everything to save them from the Wolves,

but I had already paid the greatest price when I tried to warn my father of

Horus’ treachery.’

‘I know what that cost you,’ said Malcador. ‘But do you know what it cost your father?’

‘Tell me,’ said Magnus bitterly. ***‘What did it cost Him?’***

‘Everything.’

‘After Prospero, my soul was sundered like glass upon stone…’ said Magnus.

‘I know,’ said Malcador. ‘I spent a great deal of time conversing with the soul-shard who dwelled here. In those moments I could almost forget the terror of the war raging across the heavens.’

‘He dwelled here?’

‘He did, in that villa there,’ said Malcador, pointing to a nondescript building of pale stone with a glassed atrium and a high veranda overlooking the lake.

‘I remember…’ said Magnus, and Alivia was reminded of the old men whose minds frayed at the seams and forgot the faces of their loved ones. ***‘I***

read the eight books of Aenesidemus’ **Pyrrhonist Discourses** ***there.’***

Malcador nodded and said, ‘He and I spoke of a great many things, but

most of all we debated the nature of his existence many times. He wondered if he were the real Magnus, or whether any one of the many shards he felt throughout space and time were viable separate entities. He told me he felt real, and I believe he *was* real, but even he knew he was something shorn from a greater whole.’

‘He is the best part of me,’ said Magnus, reaching down to the great grimoire at his waist, and Alivia felt a sick revulsion at the power she felt within it, the unmistakable power of planetary genocide.

Morningstar…

The significance of the name was lost on Alivia, beyond its appearance in the old religious texts, but she sensed it was as much a terrible curse to Magnus as it was a… a *weapon?*

'And that best part will be one with me again,' promised Magnus.

'You're wrong,' said Malcador. 'In that he was never the *good* part of you, he was just a *part* of you, no better or worse than any other. Each broken shard of you clung to a memory of part of you, but they were all simply a microcosm of the great soul you always were.'

Alivia saw the disbelief on Magnus' face, and also a great and building fire within as whatever certainty he had brought to this cavern crumbled in the face of Malcador's words.

'No…' he said. ***'I felt his goodness, his purity. From across the gulfs of space, even in the Great Ocean, I*** **felt** ***it. It was shorn from me before Horus poisoned the well. It is the best part of me, uncorrupted by… all of this .'***

'I am sorry, Magnus, but you are wrong,' said Malcador. 'And you are too late. He is no more.'

Magnus surged to his feet, overturning the table and scattering the board and its pieces into the water. Alivia was hurled backwards by the force and speed of Magnus' motion, the suddenness more shocking than the pain of the table edge slamming into her chest. She spun through the air, landing face down in the sand ten metres away.

Alivia coughed and spat the grit from her mouth. Blood mingled with the sand, and she cried out as she felt broken ribs shift within her chest. From the frothed blood on her lips, she knew a shard of bone must have pierced the soft tissue of her lung. She coughed up a red wad of gummed fluid and pushed herself painfully onto her side in time to see Magnus with his fist around Malcador's throat.

He held the Sigillite three metres off the ground, his life there for the taking.

The warriors Magnus had brought into the Palace backed away from him, as fearful of their master's fury as Alivia.

'I* need *him!' roared Magnus. ***'What am I without him? A beast no better than Angron? A slave to desire like Fulgrim? If he is no different from me, and I no more or less than him, then all I have done is…'***

'Is part of who you already are,' finished Alivia, and the nearest red-armoured warrior turned his bolter towards her. She pushed herself upright, stifling a cry of pain as the breath wheezed in her throat and the sharp stab of bone pierced her heart.

'I will not be like my fallen brothers, I will* not *,' said Magnus. ***'Tell me where to find the last shard of my soul or I will end you right now.'***

'He is gone,' gasped Malcador, forcing his words out as Magnus' grip closed off his airways. 'Beyond even your power to reach.'

'What did you do?' demanded Magnus.

'What needed to be done…' gasped Malcador, '…to save the last son of Prospero.'

The wisps of smoke rising from the primarch's skin billowed in darkness and swirled around him like living things. Alivia could feel the heat radiating from him, and knew that any hope Malcador had of reasoning with Magnus was gone.

She stumbled back towards the villas, knowing there was no hope of evading any pursuit, but driven to escape by the basic animal urge to flee, to survive. She had suffered greater wounds than this and lived, but never from a being as powerful as Magnus.

Alivia fell to one knee as breath failed her. She felt a horrid, sucking emptiness on the left side of her chest. Her hand clawed the sand. Pain filled her, but she'd known worse.

She heard crunching footsteps behind her and forced herself to her feet.

Her vision blurred at the edges and she coughed up another wad of bloody phlegm.

'Turn around,' said a voice: harsh, clipped and used to being obeyed.

She almost obeyed it, *almost* reacted to its commanding tone.

'Screw. You…' wheezed Alivia between tortured breaths.

She kept going, the colourful mosaic of the plaza at the centre of the villas just visible between their walls of pale marble. If she could just reach it, at least she would be out of sight of Magnus and his sorcerers. But it seemed so far away, farther with every swaying step.

If she could only…

The mass-reactive struck Alivia between her shoulder blades and penetrated deep into her chest cavity before detonating.

An instant of fire and pain, then nothing at all.

Magnus let the anger pour from him, a fire that had burned inside him since he had first swum into being all those centuries ago and looked out upon the world with an awareness unlike any other into a face as beautiful as it was terrifying.

All he had done was in service of his father, and now, at this last moment of redemption, where his past might have been granted absolution, even that was snatched away.

He loosed a roar to the cavern roof, shaking the rock with the power of his ferocity.

He heard shouts, a single mass-reactive shot.

The fire seemed to burn for an eternity, though it had been seconds at most.

Magnus dropped to his knees as the rage began to ebb. His unleashed power flowed back along his limbs as clarity returned to his sight. He smelled the rancorous odour of burned meat, and saw smoke rising from the fiery copper of his skin.

Sound swelled, the crash of rock and crystal formations tumbling from the cavern roof in vast chunks of splintered stone. Shaken loose by the elemental power of his fury, they fell as if on a pict-reel running at half-speed. When they finally struck the surface of the water, dark waves crashed upon the shore.

Magnus saw the regicide board and its pieces pulled out into the depths of the underground ocean, the outcome of this last game forever undecided.

He looked for the woman and saw her lying face down in the sand.

Most of her torso was missing, only splintered shards of ribs and a fused section of her spine attaching her upper body to her lower. Blood spread between the outer tiles of the plaza as Atra hasis walked back towards them with smoke curling from the barrel of his weapon.

'I said no killing without my word,' said Magnus.

'She–' began Atrahasis, but Magnus gave him no chance to finish.

With a thought, he detonated every atom in the warrior's body, leaving nothing but inert dust within the clattering remains of warplate that fell to the sands.

The others reeled from Atrahasis' explosive death, fearful they too might be touched by their primarch's wrath. But he had no more wrath within him, only grief, and he closed his eye, locked in position like a frozen statue.

How long he remained like that he could not say, but eventually a wary voice penetrated the fog enveloping his mind.

‘My lord.’

‘ Ahzek ***…’***

‘My lord,’ said Ahriman, with greater confidence and force. ‘We must withdraw.’

‘Withdraw?’ said Magnus. ***‘No…’***

‘We must,’ repeated Ahriman. ‘What you sought is gone, but we have struck a great blow to our enemies. One that will turn the tide of the war.’

‘A great blow…?’ said Magnus. ***‘I don’t understand…’***

And then he saw.

Still clutched in his iron grip was the Sigillite, but never again would he play regicide; never again would he stand in the presence of demigods and speak to them as equals.

Never again…

Malcador’s corpse was a char-black skeleton of heat-fused bones and roasted meat. His fleshless skull lolled on the last remnants of sinew and spinal cord, the meat of his once great mind oozing from the molten bone of his skull.

‘No!’ cried Magnus, rising to his feet and releasing his grip.

The Sigillite’s skeletal remains dropped to the shore of the lake where the ebb and flow of the new tide twisted and rolled them in the sand. His tall staff of office now served not as a banner pole, but a grave marker.

Two more deaths to add to an ever-growing tally.

‘Sire,’ said Amon. ‘Ahzek is right. We should withdraw before the Custodians come. That they are not already here is a miracle. The Sigillite’s death will have been felt, and the Emperor’s golden warriors will seek to avenge him.’

'This was never my intent,' whispered Magnus, and his own words echoed back at him in his skull, mocking him.

Your intent is meaningless. You are still responsible.

'How could we not have seen this?' wondered Menkaura. 'We are the greatest seers of the Corvidae, and none of us saw even a *sliver* of this future? The death of so significant a soul as the Regent of Terra, and *not one of us* saw this moment in our visions?'

'We are not withdrawing, we are going to the very heart of Terra,' said Magnus. ***'Nothing of what happened here matters. I saw every secret***

thing within Malcador, every hidden path and cordon within the Palace.

And I know what I have to do now.'

'Sire?'

'We are in the heart of the Sanctum Imperialis,' said Magnus, as singular purpose crystallised within him. ***'Within sight of what Alpharius failed to***

imagine and that which Horus Lupercal dares not even dream of.'

'What do you intend, my lord?' asked Ahriman.

'I am going to kill the Emperor.'

TWELVE

The Hall of Victories

Magnus led them to the plaza at the centre of the forsaken villas.

He paused at the body of Alivia Sureka, and knelt to place a hand upon the tattered remnants of her gore-spattered flak coat. Still warm, she lay in an expanding pool of glistening red that spread from her ruined torso like bloodied wings and put Magnus in mind of a fallen Valkyrie.

'I did not know you, but I am sorry this was your ending,' he said, wiping away a red tear from her glassy, dead eye.

'Atrahasis was Raptora to the core, brutal and direct,' said Ahriman. 'Yes, he disobeyed you, but he did not deserve to die like that.'

'I said there was to be no killing,' said Magnus. ***'Do my sons now pick and choose which of my orders are for obeying?'***

'Of course not, my lord, but–'

'I saw him die as we approached this cavern,' said Magnus. ***'I could make no sense of it at the time, for it was a death such as only a handful of beings in this galaxy could inflict. It never even crossed my mind it would be at my hands.'***

'And the rest of us?' demanded Ahriman. 'Did you see our deaths?'

'No,' lied Magnus, rising to his full height. ***'I did not, and before you condemn me for your man's death, look to your own guilt. Where is Hathor Maat? Did*** **he** ***deserve to die?'***

Ahriman flinched at the mention of his former brother's name.

Did you think you could restore my soul and I would not see within yours? sent Magnus so that only Ahriman would hear. ***I know what you***

did, and I know why you did it. So I do not condemn you, but it is my fervent wish you could have been spared that burden. Every step we have taken since Prospero has been in the service of others, and you gave up your brother for me. Just believe that all I have done since then is for the good of my sons.

Ahriman nodded stiffly and followed as Magnus moved to the centre of the plaza, where the confluence of the abstract patterns worked into the mosaic finally converged.

Magnus turned in a slow circle, trying to imagine which of the dwellings had been intended for which of his brothers. He could discern no differences between them enough to judge, but some of his kin had spent time here, that much he could feel.

'What might it have been like to have shared these spaces with you, my brothers?' he said. ***'Would it have been glorious or would we have squabbled and fought for the scraps of our father's attention as we did during the crusade?'***

Briefly Magnus considered exploring the villa in which his soul-shard had dwelled, but rejected the notion. What would be the point? Nostalgia for events he had not truly experienced? Reacquaintance with a life he had never lived?

No, better to leave that wound untouched.

Besides, they had only a short window in which to act.

Even now, the Custodians were likely en route, perhaps even some of his loyalist brothers.

It was a mystery to him why they were not already here. The expenditure of power in the Great Observatory ought to have drawn them near instantaneously, but that they had not yet discovered this intrusion was an opportunity Magnus did not intend to waste.

He squatted at the sigils running around the great icon of cosmic duality at the heart of the plaza and pressed a sequence he knew only from another's memory. At first nothing happened, but soon he felt a vibration through the flagstones and stepped back as a towering column of ivory rose from the ground.

Its length was porcelain smooth and apparently seamless, but moments later a curved door opened in its side and an artificial blue glow issued from within. Magnus confidently stepped into the elevator, its proportions – like those of the villas – scaled to a being of his size.

His sons accompanied him within like an honour guard, and no sooner had the doors slid shut than the elevator began a smooth descent into the depths of the planet, descending what felt like several kilometres into the heart of Himalazia.

'Do you know where this leads?' said Menkaura.

Magnus did not answer, and they continued in tense silence until the doors opened to reveal a short corridor that ended in a towering set of bronze double doors. Exquisitely carved, the twin leafs of the doors depicted a man and woman facing one another: one of the land, the other of the manufactory.

'Life and death,' said Amon, regarding the woman.

'Industry and war,' said Menkaura of the man.

'It is more than that,' said Magnus, pointing to the crossed lightning bolts of Unity hung around the man's neck. ***'It is the embodiment of my father's dream. Humanity bound endlessly to the tasks of procreation and the labours required of them in order to bathe in His light. He is their sun***

god, their Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. From worship of the Emperor comes all bounty. The stars around Him are us, the primarchs, the warrior angels who enforce His laws and fight at His command.'

'People of Earth: Unity is Strength, Division is Weakness,' said Ahriman, expertly translating the ancient language inscribed in the scrollwork above the doors.

The doors swung open easily, and beyond was a wide gallery, several hundred metres long and filled with displays, such as had been common within the pyramids of Prospero. Many of the gallery's cabinets and cases had toppled, their contents broken upon the tiled floor. Water poured in through a shattered section of the roof towards the rear of this stark gallery, ruining the many paintings, statues, carvings and tapestries stored there.

One of the long walls was lined with tall, lancet windows, but no light penetrated the oil- and dust-smeared glass save through portions where it had been shattered by the percussive impacts of shock waves. Glass shards littered the floor and a lingering taste of burnt ozone spoke of failed stasis fields.

Regret touched Magnus at the thought of what had been lost here.

That regret was washed away on the heels of another thought.

'How much did* we *lose on Tizca?' he asked, bending to retrieve the remains of a stone tablet with wedge-shaped, cuneiform script upon it. Fire and smoke had coated its surfaces in a filmy residue, already softening and obscuring much of the text.

'Incalculable,' said Amon. 'In ways too numerous to count.'

Magnus handed the tablet to Ahriman. ***'You recognise this?'***

Ahriman turned the tablet over in his hands and nodded. 'Achaemenid.

From Arg-e-Bam, a fortress at the crossroads of the Silk Road. Perhaps thirty-five thousand years old.'

'And this?' said Magnus, indicating an elaborately crafted model of a magnificent galleon set upon a raised dais. The ship was rigged with sails of thin gold, its hull crafted from gilded copper and iron. From keel to crow's nest, it stood roughly a metre high.

'A child's toy?' suggested Menkaura.

'A toy perhaps, but not one for children,' said Magnus, turning a hidden key at the vessel's stern. ***'Rather, a grand plaything for some rich***

potentate of Old Earth.'

High on the vessel's stern sat a crowned king, and before him on clockwork gimbals his subjects paraded on the carved deck, turning and making obeisance as the ratcheting mainspring turned within. Inside the vessel, a miniature organ played the off-kilter notes of a long-forgotten tune as iron cannons emerged jerkily from wooden hatches in the hull.

Magnus grinned as the cannons retracted and the figures on the deck all bowed to their king before the spring's energy was spent and the vessel stilled once more. ***'It is a clock and a music box rendered in the form of a***

galleon built to make war when control of the oceans ensured a nation

state's dominance. In ships like these, the largest and most complex

machines of their age, conquerors set off across the high seas to discover

other cultures on the other side of the planet. To trade or make war with

them. Sometimes both.'

'And they made a toy of it?' said Amon. 'That seems wasteful.'

'Not at all,' said Menkaura, bending to examine the faceless, yellow-robed king on his throne. 'This is a wonderfully constructed object, a masterpiece of

both the artificer's skill, the artist's decoration, and it displays a profound mastery of mechanics and goldsmithing.'

'What is this place?' asked Amon.

'Surely it is not hard to divine?' said Magnus. ***'It is a record of humanity's greatest achievements, each one a stepping stone into the future. It has all the hallmarks of Malcador, for the Sigillite was ever one to recognise the importance of preserving the past.'***

He remembered Kasper Hawser, the naive conservator who had spoken with such passion on the subject of humankind's lack of foresight in considering the past. The man had constantly pushed for an audit of human knowledge and the preservation of the species' legacy to determine what was still known and what had been forgotten.

Had the man ever set foot in this gallery or ever seen this record of human progress from its Palaeolithic history to its exploration of the stars?

Impossible to know, and Magnus had no knowledge of what had become of him in the wake of Prospero's doom.

Given what they had done to his mind, he was likely dead or insane.

'What would you have made of this, I wonder?' said Magnus sadly. ***'And what tears would you shed to see it all lost?'***

'My lord?' said Ahriman.

Magnus said nothing and cast all thoughts of regret and sentimentality from his mind.

He pushed deeper into the gallery, pausing every now and then to examine an object of great beauty or significance: a jade axe head, a pair of Kakiemon elephants, circuit boards from corroded husks of primitive logic engines that

were no longer home to any machine-spirit, ivory chess pieces carved from the teeth of great oceanic creatures.

All embodied consequential moments that had seen humanity rise from its earliest, primitive beginnings to the lofty heights it occupied in the present, but one in particular struck him as out of place: a broken timepiece of tarnished bronze with a cracked ebony face.

It wasn't special or even particularly attractive, and at some point, it had been exposed to great heat, for the metal had softened and deformed.

Despite that, the delicate hands were unscathed, lovingly fashioned from gold with inlaid mother of pearl. What remained of the clock's internal mechanisms were visible through a smoke-stained window near its base, a jumbled mass of toothed cogs that could never turn and copper pendulums that would never swing again.

'Why are you here?' Magnus wondered aloud.

'Because it marked a singular moment in Terra's history,' said a powerful voice from the end of the gallery. 'And my own, though I did not recognise it as such at the time.'

Magnus swung around, heqa staff raised before him, one hand on his great book.

His sons snapped into battle positions, bolters raised.

A hooded figure stood at the end of the gallery, swathed in a long cloak of scarlet.

The man was transhuman tall and beneath his long cloak, he wore utilitarian clothes, similar to those worn by virtually every inhabitant of Terra. A silver ring glittered on his right index finger, bearing a nazarlik symbol of warding.

Behind him was a simple wooden door, such as might be found in the ancient hall of a high castle of stone. A door entirely out of place in this stark gallery of glass and steel, and which Magnus knew had not been there only moments before.

‘A descendant of Mikuláš of Kadaň constructed it in his clockwork palace, high in the frozen mountains of Europa. It’s gone now, of course. I suspect that piece is perhaps the last of its kind, much like a great many things we once valued.’

‘Identify yourself,’ ordered Magnus.

The man slowly reached up and pulled back his hood to reveal a stern, but not unkind face. Unremarkable in its own way, but the man’s eyes were without pupils and shone with a golden light that identified him better than any name ever could.

‘When last I wore this guise I went by Revelation.’

The light of Revelation shone throughout the gallery, and all the shattered relics of humanity’s ascent gleamed as though fresh from their ancient makers’ hands. Dead machines whirred to life, the organ within the clockwork ship played its maritime tune flawlessly, and the clock beside Magnus chimed softly as its hands clicked to the vertical.

‘You know why I am here?’ asked Magnus.

The door behind Revelation opened, spilling fresh radiance into the gallery.

‘I do,’ said Revelation. ‘But first we will talk, my son.’

BOOK FIVE

THRONE ROOM

THIRTEEN

Adrift

An achingly blue sky filled her vision, the skies of her youth, unpolluted by petrochemical emissions and hydrocarbon pollutants. The secrets of the fuels locked within Earth's body were well known even then, but the conspicuous consumption of such fuels on a global scale was millennia in the future.

The view from the mountain's summit was breathtaking: misted valleys, deep forests and dark oceans of infinite mystery.

But it was always the sky she came back to.

Alivia had seen the skies of many worlds since then, but none compared to the glory of Old Earth. Parochial perhaps, but she couldn't deny the call her home world had on her soul.

So why were we in such a rush to leave it…?

A memory of pain surfaced in her mind, but she pushed it away.

Alivia did not want to leave this place of memory and peace.

She knew it was a remembrance of the land of her birth, a vision of a time before the world had shown her its true face and bloodily revealed her own secret nature. The last time she had seen this place in dreams, it had been hijacked by John Grammaticus with a warning.

Remembering that moment, her gaze shifted down from the endless skies to the edge of the forest. The trees grew dense, only the slowly encroaching moonlight shadows visible between their claw-scored trunks.

She smiled as she saw the powerful stag once again. It grazed at the edge of the trees, its sheer magnificence no less thrilling to see with repetition.

But its splendour was diminished this time, its red-gold hide patchy from some desperate flight, and its once mighty antlers snapped and foreshortened from bloody battle.

Once he had been the master of this mountain, and had led the wild hunt over the high hills and far moors, but now he was at bay and taking this moment to gather his strength.

Alivia held her breath, lest even a whisper of movement break the spell.

The stag's head came up, his nostrils twitching.

The last time she had seen the stag he had bolted for the towering peaks, a pack of red-eyed wolves snapping at his hooves, but now he walked slowly towards her.

With every step, the outline of the stag *shifted*, sloughing its shroud of metaphor and assuming the form in which she had last seen him: a tall man in the sturdy attire of an agri-worker, handsome in a rangy sort of way, with a wiry auburn beard, broad shoulders and strong arms crisscrossed with scars.

Another disguise, but a pleasing one at least.

But no matter the face He presented to the world, He could never conceal the raw power and threat behind His eyes.

'When I left Terra I told you I never wanted to see you again,' she said.

'I know, and I wanted to respect that, truly I did, but…'

His words trailed off. No explanation was needed.

'I stood watch for you on Molech, but I couldn't stop him.'

He didn't need to ask who she meant.

'I know. It was an impossible task, Alivia. No one could have stopped him.

Not empowered as he was.'

‘We tried,’ said Alivia. ‘Good men died trying to stop him.’

‘But not you.’

‘No, not me,’ she spat bitterly. ‘It’s never me that dies.’

They sat in silence for a time, enjoying the view over the ocean. She’d sailed the far corners of the Earth in her long years, but never tired of watching and listening to waves on a shingled beach or crashing against a cliff.

‘Why are you here?’ said Alivia. ‘Don’t you have more important things to do? You know, fate of the galaxy, defending Terra, that sort of thing?’

He nodded. ‘I have an unfathomable amount of important things to do,

Alivia, and many of them are reaching their conclusion.’

‘And I’m guessing your being here means one of them involves me?’

‘It does.’

‘Am I going to like it?’

He thought for a moment, then said, ‘No, but it must be done.’

‘Then to hell with you,’ said Alivia. ‘You don’t command me, not any more. You swore the task on Molech would be my last.’

‘One might argue that you failed in that task.’

‘Screw you,’ snapped Alivia. ‘You just said that no one could have stopped Horus from going through that portal. I remember carrying you up those stairs and you telling me that I could be done with you.’

‘And I meant it,’ He said, reaching to take her hand. ‘I still do, and I wish I did not have to ask. But let me show you what is at stake.’

She snatched her hand away and said, ‘I saw Molech fall. I’ve been outside the walls of your Palace. Trust me, I know what’s at stake. Besides, even if

Horus wins, I don't think he could balls things up any worse than you.'

'You don't believe that,' he said. 'You know what's out there in the dark.

You've heard the whispers of the Neverborn and you have seen what happens when men give in to the temptations of Chaos. I would not ask if there were any other way.'

'You are a liar and a monster, a manipulator and a killer,' said Alivia.

'Your armies slaughtered millions in the name of Unity and crushed anyone who opposed your rule. You made monsters from your own flesh then turned them loose on the galaxy and you act surprised when they turn on you? All in the name of a vision only you could see. You know that Magnus killed Malcador, yes?'

He nodded, His shoulders slumped. 'I felt him die. I felt his agony as Magnus ended him.'

The tears He shed were real and painfully raw, and Alivia's hatred and love for Him was so powerful it hurt her heart. Tears welled in her eyes, but she angrily wiped them away.

'There is so much blood on your hands,' she said. 'On *all* our hands. I just want it to end.'

'Then *help* me end it,' He said, offering her His hand once again. 'Let me share with you *my* Acuity.'

Slowly, and against her better judgement, Alivia took His hand.

And the Emperor showed her everything in the space of a moment.

Alivia threw back her head and screamed.

Endlessly, like the withered corpse she saw locked within the Golden Throne.

Stepping through the incongruous wooden door, Magnus experienced a momentary tug of dislocation, like a teleport flare, but deeper and more

profound. A shiver travelled the length of his body as he felt the temperature gradient shift.

Wherever they were now, they were far deeper underground than before.

Revelation awaited them, His golden eyes shining even brighter.

'I have been here before,' said Magnus, and a wave of shame washed over him.

'Memories of your soul-shard?' asked Ahriman.

'No,' said Revelation, addressing Ahriman directly. 'Your gene-sire came not as a shade, nor in a borrowed memory of another piece of himself, but as Magnus the Red, a proud and loyal son of the Emperor of Mankind.'

'Is this…?' said Amon.

'The Throne Room,' finished Magnus.

Though the Thousand Sons were pledged to the Warmaster's cause and fought alongside warriors who sought to tear down every edifice of the Imperium, the shared heritage of this place was too great to ignore. It hung heavily upon them as Revelation led them deeper into the Emperor's inner sanctum.

The cavern of the underground lake had been unimaginably vast, but this subterranean donjon was orders of magnitude greater. It was filled with machinery: endless lengths of hissing pipes and cables coiled across the floor and hung from the walls like wounded serpents. Towering banks of straining equipment were set with myriad readouts and gauges, though what they measured was a mystery to Magnus.

The floor vibrated to the thrumming workings of buried machinery and the pounding of distant pistons moving endlessly in the farthest reaches of the cavern. Reeking, ozone exhalations from gigantic terraforming processors fogged the air, and coruscating arcs of power leapt between giant machines tasked with the maintenance of energy flow.

Thousands of oil-stained menials ministered to the machines beneath the watchful gaze of Mechanicum tech-priests cowled in red and black. Magnus heard binharic screeches of alarm, but instead of fleeing before these enemy warriors, their chimeric faces of metal and flesh adjudged the new arrivals to be less of a priority than the machinery they attended.

At the geomantic centre of this immense cavern was the strange and terrible edifice of gold he had seen in person, vision and dream. A gigantic, towering dais, kilometres tall and inlaid with silvery traceries of runic circuitry. It was to this arcane technology, the functioning of which not even Magnus could fathom, that every machine, above and below, was enslaved, a Gordian network of cables and pipelines that drew immense volumes of power to its mystical beating heart.

Yet it was not this that drew Magnus' eye.

Beyond this mountainous dais were vast cyclopean golden doors, their surfaces buckled by titanic impacts and forces beyond imagining. Each was so immense it could allow the greatest war machines of the Mechanicum to march through with armoured heads held high. Entire armies could pass beyond these portals, their dimensions larger than anything Magnus had seen in the Outer Palace.

Even the portals running through Colossi and Gorgon Bar paled into insignificance.

Not even Lion's Gate was equal in scale or grandeur.

Yet it was not even these inhumanly scaled portals that drew Magnus' eye.

His gaze was fixed upon the titanic throne of gold and silver raised upon the highest tier of the golden structure. Its form was layered in a patchwork of bronze and platinum, as though its inner workings had failed and been repaired many times. Seated atop this unknowable machine, His head locked back with His eyes tightly closed, was a figure clad from head to toe in armour of burnished gold.

Pellucid ghost lights of amber washed across His granite skin in gently lapping waves, illuminating His husked pallor, the tautness of His jaw, the

awesome strength radiating from Him and the pain of His suffering. The scale of the power flowing through the machine and into his father was unimaginable.

'Do I speak to Him or to you? *'*

'We are one and the same, but address your words to me,' said Revelation.

'The damage you wrought upon the golden doors requires my primary focus. The assaults of the Neverborn from the other side are unceasing, and the war in the webway grows ever more fierce.'

'I did that?' asked Magnus, horrified. ***'When I tried to warn you of***

Horus' perfidy?'

'You did,' agreed Revelation. 'The irony of your purpose and its outcome are not lost on me, Magnus, but it has cost so much to keep the Neverborn hordes back that I find myself unable to truly appreciate it. Hundreds of thousands of lives spent fighting a numberless host of filth and corruption.

Without my continued presence upon the Golden Throne, Terra would even now be a daemon world.'

'I… I could not have known,' said Magnus, gripping his staff so tight, its woven wood and adamantium core began to crack. The hissing voices from his grimoire, the victims of a murdered world, now made themselves known, emerging from its capricious pages in rippling slicks of witchfire and crawling along his arms, eager and ambitious.

'You were told,' said Revelation. 'You were instructed. You were warned, but *you knew better*.'

'I knew only what **you** ***told me,'*** snapped Magnus, the light of Morningstar coruscating along the length of his staff.

'And I will admit to the fault of that,' said Revelation. 'You were birthed to see further than any of your brothers, but I understood the dark and infernal and *eternal* magnitude of the warp better than you. And when I told you there

were places even I was unwilling to go and lines I was unwilling to cross, then that ought to have been enough for you.'

The arrogance and presumption in Revelation's words were like a slap to the face.

'Your conceit is staggering, your arrogance unmatched,' said Magnus.

He felt his need for violence eclipse his need for answers, but fought it down for now.

Magnus looked around the chamber, unable to reconcile his continued presence and the utter lack of any protection surrounding the Emperor.

'Where are your praetorians?' said Magnus. ***'The fighting on the walls is desperate, and I saw thousands of Constantin's men at Colossi, but the captain-general of the Legio Custodes would never consent to leaving you entirely unguarded.'***

'I removed them from my presence, my son,' said Revelation. 'Even now they are attempting to break in, fearing I am about some scheme that might endanger my life.'

'And are you?' said Magnus, stepping towards Revelation.

'Very likely,' said the man. 'There is a reason why your steps led you to Leng. I hoped you would remember the secret way through the observatory.

And the Hall of Victories has long been my own hidden way to walk among my people without escort.'

The implications of Revelation's words hit Magnus like a blow.

'You* let *me see the crack in the telaethesic ward…'

Revelation nodded. 'I did. You would never have come had I summoned you.'

'And why would you summon me?' demanded Magnus. ***'You must have known what I would do were I ever to stand before you.'***

Revelation stepped forward and placed a hand on Magnus' shoulder. His eyes were burning pools of molten gold, depthless and bright like the hearts of stars.

He shook His head and said, 'I hoped I did, my son, but I could not know the answer to that mystery until you were here, which was what made this gambit so dangerous, why I had to keep it from Constantin and all others save Malcador.'

'Dangerous? As the Saturnine ruse was dangerous?'

Revelation chuckled and said, 'Rogal's plan was a certainty compared to this.'

'Then allow me to answer that mystery,' said Magnus, ramming the tip of his staff into Revelation's chest. A torrent of unearthly fire poured along its length, unmaking his father's avatar from the inside out.

The man who was not a man screamed as the purest fire of the Pyrae consumed His created flesh, the psychic flames burning in realms mortal and immaterial. It spread along Revelation's limbs, illuminating His body and outstretched arms from within as He shrieked and writhed like a snared beast.

The light faded, and when it was gone, so too was Revelation.

Only the silver ring the man wore survived the fire, falling to the stone floor with a musical *clink*. Magnus bent to retrieve it, stirring the ashes of Revelation with the end of his staff as he slipped the ring over the middle finger of his right hand. The stylised eye carved into its flattened head was exquisitely carved.

Magnus made a fist as his sons gathered round.

He felt their confusion, their feeling of being adrift. None of them had seen this moment, not even him. To know nothing of the future was a prospect no

warrior of the Corvidae relished.

‘You killed him…’ said Amon.

‘I killed a puppet, not the master,’ said Magnus, rising and making his way towards the golden dais. As he placed his foot upon the first step, he turned back to his expectant sons.

‘This reunion is not for you,’ he said. ***‘Form a mandala, or at least as much of one as you can make with only three of you, and wait for me.’***

Ahriman stepped forward and said, ‘Do what must be done, my lord.’

Magnus nodded and began climbing towards the giant figure upon the Golden Throne with singular purpose. Behind him, his sons formed a segment of a mandala at the base of the steps, bolters held at their sides as they rose into the martial enumerations.

His stride was long and driven, and though the throne atop this mountain was far distant, it took him only moments to reach the wide summit of the dais.

Though he had seen Him from afar, to be in such close proximity to his father cut him deeper than he’d expected. Not since Nikaea had they shared the same physical space, and the hypocrisy of that day still twisted in his heart like shrapnel too dangerous to remove.

Closer now, Magnus could see the visible strain upon his father’s face. The canyon lines of tension, the slick sheen of sweat upon His laurelled brow.

His eyes remained tightly shut, though He must surely have sensed Magnus was coming with murder in his heart.

But still He remained seated, ignoring His son’s presence.

Magnus looked back to the cavern floor as he heard the unmistakable roar of mass-reactives.

Six warriors, moving in at speed. Using the vast machinery as cover.

Three in armour of winter ice, three in deepest jade. VI and XVIII. Lemuel Gaumon followed behind, sinking to his knees behind the logic engines in awe. At first Magnus thought the Space Wolves slow and plodding, but quickly realised that the enormity of his father's presence was affecting them also.

Such fury to overcome their awe!

Magnus' gaze narrowed as he realised he knew the warriors of the VI Legion from the shared memory engrams of his sons.

'The watch pack of Bödvar Bjarki,' he said. ***'And you bring Nocturnean allies.'***

These dogs of Russ had fought his sons on Kamiti Sona and followed through the Great Ocean to assault them in the heart of the crystalline labyrinth.

There are no coincidences…

Gunfire whickered back and forth between the Space Marines. His sons were outnumbered two to one, but even without the full scope of their powers, he had no fear for their lives.

Magnus turned from the fight below. He could not afford to hesitate.

To pause in the face of synchronistic enemies, even for a fraction of a breath, would rob him of his resolve. He thought back to Prospero, to the irreplaceable knowledge that had been lost and his many sons who had died there. To the lies and betrayal at Nikaea. He thought of the falsehoods he had been assured were truths, the broken promises, and the lost hope of a shared future of exploration within the Great Ocean.

He looked into the face of his father, drawing his arm back to hurl his staff like a native harpooner with the perfect cast into the eye of a whale.

The spear trembled in his grip, forming the perfect blade.

His knuckles pressed white on its smoking haft.

Its bladed tip burned orange, brightening to molten radiance, infused with all the anguish of Magnus' fractured soul. It would be a killing strike, powerful enough to end a god's reign.

He lowered the spear, his head sinking to his chest as regret threatened to choke him. The rage and power suffusing its god-slaying blade was snuffed out like a candle at dawn.

'I loved you like no other,' wept Magnus.

A blur of motion snapped his head up as a form his equal in stature smashed down hard on the summit of the dais like a thunderstrike. A shock wave blew out in a ring of force, and flames ripped from nearby machines as arcs of overloading energy erupted like geysers.

Magnus shielded his eyes as furnace heat rippled the air, staring in

disbelief at the form emerging from the dissipating cloud of superheated vapour and bleeding light.

A kneeling colossus in green armour rose slowly from the crater his landing had buckled in the metal floor. A burnished cloak of umber scale was clasped to a mighty draconic skull at the shoulder of the finest warplate known to the Imperium, and monstrous gauntlets snarled with blue-hot energies.

His skin was midnight dark like polished obsidian, and his eyes were the red of a sunset at battle's end. One hand was clenched into a brawler's fist, while the other held a mighty warhammer of indestructible iron and bronze named *Urdrakule*.

'So the rumours were true,' said Magnus. ***'Vulkan lives…'***

FOURTEEN

A Precursor to Change

Mass-reactives exploded in the air before Ahriman. Instinctive kine shields caught some and Corvidae foresight allowed him to evade the others. Pyrae fire detonated warheads and Pavoni biomancy altered the chemical composition of explosive cores to render them inert.

The mandala, such as it was, combined their power, a well for each warrior to draw upon.

'Who are they?' cried Amon, rising to the fifth. 'Custodes?'

Ahriman scanned the space before them: too many approaches, too misted by machine breath and strobing with crackling electric bleed. His bolter tracked his gaze as he caught flashes of war-scarred plate, ice blue and earthen green.

He tasted the wet, animal reek of snow-blasted skin. Of bone beads and matted beards, caustic liquor and meat ripped raw from the bone. A feral stink filled his nostrils, cold with magic drawn from the primal heart of a far-distant world, a world where life was held cheap and blood was the payment for land-thirst.

'It's not the Praetorians,' said Ahriman, recognising this power. 'It's Bjarki.'

'The Wolf of Nikaea?' asked Menkaura, an edge of panic in his tone.

Ahriman half turned to face him, sensing a spike of fear in the seer's aura.

His concentration slipped and a deflected bolt shell clipped his shoulder guard. Robbed of force enough not to penetrate by impact alone, it detonated a metre from his head. Shrapnel slammed his helmet. His vision fogged red.

The howl of a hunting pack echoed weirdly throughout the cavern.

But how many throats gave voice to it?

His warplate registered a sudden, catastrophic drop in ambient temperature.

'Brace!' yelled Ahriman as a storm of ice roared towards them, a blitzing hurricane of razored shards. It battered them, sliced the skin and threw off their shared aim. Ahriman brought up a kine shield, too late. A thousand

needles of ice shattered against his armour, sliced his exposed skin, and threw him from the enumerations.

A shrieking ululation clawed his mind, raw and seeking his prey reflex.

His limbs tried to lock in fear, but Ahriman shook off this blunt assault on his senses.

'I know your power,' he said, dropping to a crouch and snapping off shots at the shadows moving in the mist. They were fast, *too fast* for heavily armoured warriors. But where they moved the percussive thud of bolters immediately followed.

Amon fell back, three rounds cratering his plastron. Menkaura's silver helm gleamed in the winterlight. More shells shivered the air around him, displaced air rocking him back.

The roar of gunfire was too intense, too sustained for only three warriors.

'They're not alone,' shouted Ahriman as a shape reared out of the mist.

Ahriman rolled and snapped off a pair of shots that took his attacker in the hip and torso. The first ricocheted away, the second tore the leather wolf-shield totem from his ice-blue chestplate.

A monstrous axe with a crackling, rune-etched blade swung down and slammed into the ground, splitting the rock floor where Ahriman had stood a fraction of a second before. So swift was the assault that Ahriman's foresight was all but useless.

Another blow came at him, too fast to avoid.

He lowered his shoulder into the blow, forced to take the impact on his pauldron.

Ceramite split and the impact hurled him backwards. He landed hard and rose to one knee in time to face the berserk charge of a barrel-chested legionary with a forked beard. The Space Wolf howled, and there was madness in the sound, a mind lost to his Legion's savage soul.

Ahriman pulsed a lance of terror into the warrior's brain, but whatever red mist was upon him cared nothing for the fear of death.

'Your maleficarum is powerless against me!' roared the Space Wolf, his axe cutting towards Ahriman's neck in an executioner's strike. Prescience had already shifted him back, and the killing edge passed the breadth of a finger from his gorget.

Ahriman stepped in and rammed his bolter into the warrior's side.

'Powers or not,' he said, 'I am still Astartes.'

He pulled the trigger, and at such close range, the damage was horrific, two shells tearing through the layers of ceramite and plasteel to the body below. The first ricocheted downward from his rib-plate, travelling the length of the warrior's cuisse plates before exploding in the centre of his knee.

The second gouged a tunnel through his midsection before blasting out of his backplate.

Ahriman's pleasure at the wounds was short-lived as he saw the warrior's next blow coming a second before the blindingly swift reverse stroke hit.

The axe smashed into his chestplate, biting deep and smashing him into the ground.

The pain was horrendous, the bone shield of his chest shattered into an archipelago of floating fragments. His primary lungs collapsed, obliterated by the concussive pressure wave of the axe's impact.

He tried to draw breath, but couldn't. His secondary lung kicked in with a rasping lurch, unfolding within his chest with a wet sucking sound. It was grossly inefficient in the crucible of combat, designed only for survival in low-oxygenated environments. The fury of close-quarter battle demanded far more than it could deliver.

A plume of Pyrae fire behind him illuminated the cavern and a portion of the storm's ice boiled away into superheated steam. Ahriman tried to focus his thoughts, his Corvidae insight seeming to slow the passage of time.

He saw Menkaura fighting a burning huntsman armed with serrated spear as Amon traded blows with Bjarki himself. A storm of psychic energy surrounded them.

Amon was one of the greatest sorcerer lords of the Thousand Sons, but the drag factor of the telaethesic ward was hampering his powers. It seemed to have no effect on the one-armed Bjarki, who shrugged off all Amon's attacks as though he were but a neophyte.

He had no time to think. The berserk axeman was upon him again.

His breath was liquid fire in his chest, his lung straining at the limits of endurance to keep him alive. Ahriman saw a vision of his block failing an instant before he lifted his ebon staff, saw the axe smash it aside and continue on to bury itself in his throat. It would be cataclysmic damage, a killing wound. An end to his wyrd, as Bjarki would say.

Instead of blocking, he lunged forward, taking the fight to the axeman.

It was not his way. Ahzek Ahriman did not trade blows like a common pit-fighter.

Except now he was. Now he was *forced* to.

They slammed to the ground, too close for weapons, rolling and clawing at one another like barbarians. The Space Wolf slammed his head forward.

Ahriman lowered his to meet him, and their skulls crashed together in a ferocious hammering of bone. Ahriman reeled, his vision a blazing starburst of dazzling light.

His prowess in such brawls was no match for the lusty killing power of the Space Wolf.

The warrior roared in his face, blood-flecked spittle spraying Ahriman's visor. The Space Wolf's fist thundered down, hammering his helm again and again, driven by lunatic fury and base savagery. Ahriman twisted his head to lessen the force of each blow, but it was hopeless.

The Space Wolf was going to beat his skull to bloody mulch.

The metal of his helmet buckled, collapsing inwards. Smashed armourglass sliced open the skin over his eye. Deforming metal broke the bone in his cheek.

He reached down, fumbling at the heavy rope tied around the Space Wolf's belt.

Where is it…? Your kind never goes without…

His fingers closed around the leather-wrapped grip of a broad, gutting knife. Oversized, exaggeratedly so, its serrated blade was crudely wrought.

But it would suffice.

His helm split and the frozen touch of the ice storm rushed in. Blood filled the socket of his left eye. His mouth tasted of tin, and the hot stench of the Space Wolf's breath made him gag.

Ahriman wrenched the Space Wolf's blade from the loop on his belt. A

reinforced fist arced back to finally drive itself through his skull. He screamed as he rammed the gutting blade up through the wound his bolter round had gouged in the Space Wolf's flank.

The eighth enumeration empowered it, his muscles burning with righteous fury as he drove the blade up and under his foe's bone shield. The jagged edge tore through the Space Wolf's lungs and heart, but Ahriman kept going, working the blade side to side like a lever to wreak as much bloody havoc as he could. The knife ripped up into the warrior's throat, Ahriman's arm elbow-deep in his enemy's body.

A flood of gore spilled from the Space Wolf's mouth, drenching Ahriman's face.

He gagged and spat as the dying legionary struggled for life. The Space Wolf was dead, but wouldn't die. He kept fighting, weakly punching Ahriman with the last of his strength before collapsing on top of him.

Gagging on blood, Ahriman struggled out from beneath the Space Wolf's corpse.

He looked up, seeing three warriors in jade-green armour begin the long and arduous ascent to the golden dais where Magnus had climbed to face his father. They moved as if into a great and invisible force, the sheer power of the Emperor's psychic might seeking to press them to the ground in obeisance.

He tried to rise into his powers, but the pain was too intense, too all-consuming.

The mandala was broken. He saw Menkaura on his knees before the fire-blackened huntsman, spitted on his serrated harpoon. The dying Space Wolf tore the shaft from Menkaura's body, its reversed barbs dragging out looping coils of intestines in a red flood. Menkaura clutched his belly, hauling at his innards as if he could somehow repack them inside his gutted body. Not content with that wound, the huntsman spun on his heel and rammed the spear through Menkaura's chest.

When the spear was wrenched out again, Menkaura toppled over, an ocean of blood surrounding him in a red lake. Moments later, the huntsman fell to his knees, the psychic fire guttering and dying as the Space Wolf's life was spent.

Near where Menkaura lay, Amon was on his back, his head turned away from Ahriman. The side of his helmet was a shattered ruin where a bolt-

round had blown it out.

Ahriman could not tell if he was alive or dead.

He reached for his heqa staff, lying close by, but a booted foot stamped down on it, snapping it in two before kicking the pieces away. Blinking away sticky runnels of blood from his eye, Ahriman looked up into a face he had last seen on Nikaea.

The same hawk nose, ragged beard over lean features, and grinning eyes.

But those eyes were not grinning now.

‘I told you your wyrd would end badly,’ snarled Bjarki.

Magnus expected to see hate in his brother’s eyes, but he saw only great sadness.

He brought his staff up once more, expecting a furious charge, but Vulkan did not attack. Instead, he lowered his mighty warhammer and hung it from a clawed hook at his belt.

‘Brother,’ said Vulkan.

Another single word to the heart. Another word that bore great power, but this time said without subterfuge, only the stoic honesty for which Vulkan was known. In times of old, he might have embraced his brother in a clatter of warplate, made some aloof comment on his dull pragmatism, or counselled him to lift his gaze from the forgefire once in a while.

But these were not times of old, they were the new days of war and death.

What could he say to a brother who thought him a monster?

‘I have a memory,’ he began, his voice as cracked and broken as his soul.

‘A faded scrap of a memory, but a memory nonetheless. I stood vigil over your body with one of your sons. I do not know his name, but he held fast to his belief that you would walk among us again. I saw a white flame eternal. A mountain of black smoke and world-ending fire. I did not know what it meant at the time…’

‘That son was Artellus Numeon,’ said Vulkan. ‘It is only thanks to his courage and faith that I live again. And it was thanks to you he was able to bring me home to Nocturne.’

‘I don’t remember that, not fully,’ said Magnus. ***‘But I saw your corpse,***

cold and lifeless. How is it that you are alive?'

'In truth I do not know,' said Vulkan. 'The ancient fire priests of Nocturne would say that the ur-drakes who dwell in the world of my birth brought me

back. They would say the great drakes breathed the unbound flame into my soul and ignited the fire in my heart once more.'

Magnus smiled at Vulkan's words and cast his gaze around the vast cavern.

'I admire the poetic turn of phrase, but* this *is the world of your birth. Of

all our births.'

'Our father crafted the iron of my soul and the stone of my flesh here, but it was Nocturne that *made* me. Just as Prospero made you.'

Vulkan took a step closer, and Magnus tensed, but his brother's intent was not violence.

'This war has taken so much from us both,' said Vulkan. 'The Imperium is sundered by the flames of war, and nothing ever returns from the fire unchanged. No matter the outcome of the fighting above, the Imperium will never be the same again.'

Magnus nodded. ***'I am no master of hearth and forge like you, brother,***

but the fire strengthens some things, does it not?'

'In the hands of a skilled smiter, aye, it can,' agreed Vulkan. 'But the fires burning all across Terra are those of a blind apprentice. Nothing good will come of it.'

Warming to his theme, Magnus said, ***'The transformative nature of fire,***

though clearly destructive, is often a necessary precursor to change.

Perhaps, in the grand scheme of things, that will be a good thing? The

enemy of progress is stasis, and all things have in their nature a tendency towards complexity. That tendency has carried the universe from almost perfect simplicity to the level of magnificence we see all around us.'

'Always the teacher,' said Vulkan with a wry smile.

It was a rare enough thing that Magnus felt the rest of his metaphysical argument dissipate entirely, but as pleasant as it was to stand face to face with his brother, Magnus knew he was an unwelcome visitor in his father's great sanctum. He was much diminished, but Vulkan, for all that he had apparently died, seemed mightier than ever.

'Do you intend to stop me?' said Magnus.

'That depends, brother,' said Vulkan. 'Do you still intend to cast that spear of yours?'

Magnus looked down at the spear and its form twisted, transforming from a weapon of war to the crook-topped staff of a master of Prospero's

Fellowships.

'I… I don't know any more,' he said. ***'When I followed Revelation, I was singular in my purpose, but now…? I have wandered far, but I am more lost than ever before…'***

'You are not lost, my son, you are exactly where you need to be.'

Magnus looked into his father's eyes as they opened in golden fire.

Tizca.

Magnus drew in a breath as he beheld the City of Light in all its glory, flashes of sunlight glittering like noonday stars from the polished glass of the great pyramids. The sky was the perfect shade of cornflower blue, and the scent of

recent summer rain was like honeydew. Clouds ran in thin lines of purple over the mountainous horizon, and the salt-tang blowing in from the ocean was a scent he thought he would never smell again.

Tears came to him, and he let them flow for the loss of his home world.

'It was so beautiful,' he said, sensing an unmistakable presence behind him.

'It was,' agreed his father. 'I remember the day I first set foot on Prospero.

You had made a paradise here, my son.'

'The only paradise is a paradise lost,' said Magnus sadly. ***'It exists now only in my memory, for the reality of what has become of Tizca is too painful.'***

His father nodded. 'A wise man once said that as memory may be a paradise from which we cannot be driven, it may also be a hell from which we cannot escape.'

Magnus turned to his father, seeing Him clad all in gold, His armour too brilliant to look upon. At first glance, it could be mistaken for something ceremonial, its every plate engraved and etched with baroque carvings, studded with polished gemstones and its every fluted edge worked with the most intricate of details.

But upon closer inspection, it was clear this armour had seen fierce battle, bore the impacts of many weapons and was stained with the blood of countless foes.

He shone with an inner light that Magnus well remembered from that first meeting, when they had embraced beneath the fire of the Pyrae Fellowship's pyramid. The great god-machine *Canis Vertex* had not yet taken its place at the entrance, but the blue flame at its summit cast a cold light over the glass of its sloping surfaces.

'I came to kill you,' said Magnus.

‘I know. Is that still your intent?’

‘I no longer understand what my intent is,’ said Magnus. ***‘The variables at play in the galaxy defy any of the formulae I might divine. Even the Order of Ruin would fail to see a path in this dark forest.’***

‘Then allow me to show you a possible path,’ said the Emperor.

His father set off along one of the side streets, running towards Occullum Square.

They passed an ornamental garden of psychically sculpted topiary in which scholars led discussion groups, couples read together in comfortable silence, and laughing children passed a ball between them using only the power of their minds.

Magnus heard a song from somewhere, a street performer playing a melody the first psychic settlers to reach Prospero had composed that spoke of their flight from Old Earth: *Those being all my study,*

The crown I cast upon the Earth.

And to my state grew stranger,

And rapt in secret studies.

The people of Tizca walked around them, as clean-limbed and beautiful as he remembered them, robed in many colours, with great minds and inquisitive natures.

It was almost too much to bear.

‘Why did you bring me here?’ asked Magnus.

‘I did not,’ said the Emperor. ‘You did.’

‘That’s not what I meant. Why did you bring me to stand before you? If

Malcador wasn't lying, then you* wanted *me here, right now. In front of you.'

His father nodded. 'Malcador spoke true. It was the last thing he did.'

Magnus hung his head in shame. ***'I did not mean to kill him.'***

'I know, but his death was a sacrifice he knew he might be asked to make.

He knew that and accepted it. Another death in a grand procession of them.

Painful in its own way, for he and I have shared a journey longer than most men or gods can dare reckon. Yet, in the macro of what our species faces, his death is irrelevant.'

'I always forget how cold you can be,' said Magnus.

'It is not coldness, it is reality. What might be gained by his sacrifice will be of far greater worth than a single life. A thousand lives would still be a price worth paying for what you and I might achieve.'

'You and I?'

'Yes,' said his father, and the promise of that word was the first light of dawn.

'I don't understand.'

'I wanted you here before me so there would be no mistakes, no misunderstandings, and no way for the Ruinous Powers set against me to twist my words or intent. I wanted you here before me so you could look me in the eye and understand the truth of what I offer.'

Magnus' breath caught in his throat.

His father turned to face him, and Magnus met His terrible gaze, feeling the inhuman power that lay at His heart. It was power that could strip a man down to atoms in a heartbeat and breathe him anew with an exhalation.

That power had endured uncounted millennia, growing with every passing century and honing its edge for the age in which it was needed.

'And what is it you offer?'

'The chance to stand at my side once again,' said his father. 'Forgiveness.'

FIFTEEN

Blood of Ur-Drakes

Tizca's light fell away from Magnus, and now he was flying.

Adrift in the Great Ocean, he was unbound from all physical limitations, a being of mind and memory. He was thought, free from required form and mundane function.

He soared past binary stars, plunged into their nuclear hearts and basked in the secret light of their cores. He saw the birth of species unknown to mankind and the doom of those upon whose ruins and bones men and women had built.

Nor did he fly alone.

His father burned at his side, a gleaming comet of power and might.

Magnus had flown the Great Ocean since his inception, but the Emperor had known it since earlier epochs of humanity. They circled the great singularity at the heart of the Milky Way, slingshotting out to the halo stars to bathe in the light of distant galaxies. They followed the arcs of migratory comets, explored the nurseries of newborn stars, and shaped the destinies of cooling protoplanets.

Magnus was a child again, a fresh mind shepherded through the Great Ocean and shielded from its deep water predators by his father. The Emperor's light

drew them, but He laughed as He destroyed them or turned them against one another.

Time was meaningless here, for this was the galaxy's infancy and death all in one.

Their course spiralled back towards a pale blue dot in the western spiral

arm of the galaxy. An insignificant world, a world no different from tens of thousands of others just like it, yet this one possessed a destiny no other would share.

Terra.

They plunged towards it, falling through its atmosphere to see a world Magnus had never known, a beautiful expanse of blue oceans, silver mountains, swathes of green forest and endlessly swaying fields of gold.

Not Terra then, but Old Earth.

And just as they had seen ancient civilisations rise and fall out in the galactic depths, so too did they bear witness to the growth and collapse of countless cultures here. The sudden and catastrophic doom of Ancient Assyriu, the rapid expansion and slow break up of the Grekan and Romanii city states, the land of the Prusai, Albyon's Great Empire, and countless more: Tolosa, Dal-Riada, Byzantion, Tsernagora, Sabaudia.

The litany of vanished empires was endless.

Magnus thought of those ancient kings and queens, seated on their thrones and hearing tales of ruined civilisations. He pictured them laughing at the foolishness of these dead kingdoms, never once imagining that such a fate might one day befall them.

He looked at the incandescent brightness of his father.

Was He now facing that same moment?

The green-and-blue world became one of steel and stone, its once clear atmosphere burned with toxic fogs and its polluted oceans rising to reclaim the land. Wars of land-thirst grew to engulf entire continents, then spread ever wider as competition for resources led the global super-blocs to turn on one another.

Spasms of self-destruction flared and burned across the planet's surface, and time and time again the world's populace grew to unsustainable proportions before shrinking back to walk the knife edge of extinction.

Through it all, Magnus saw patterns endlessly repeat, moments of significance rhyming all through the course of human history. The same mistakes, the same wilful ignorance.

The same hubris.

Expeditions were hurled into space almost as soon as technology allowed, colony ships, terraformers, holy pilgrims, fleets of conquest. A centuries-long migration into the stars began, a gloriously foolhardy expansion into the unknown depths of space or a golden age of exploration, it was hard to say for sure.

It seemed humanity was done with its once blue world, that it was to be abandoned now that it was all used up and had nothing left to give.

But then came Old Night.

Even in this phantom form, Magnus felt the screams from all across the cosmos. He wept as he felt pain and loss like never before. Even in the wake of Prospero's razing he had not shed so many tears.

But again, just as it seemed that humanity's time was done, it endured.

The time of nations fell away, and the age of the techno-barbarian tribes began, a savage aeon of ethnarchs and despots, of barbarous kings and bloody priests. It seemed as though mankind must extinguish itself by cutting its own throat, yet even now, Magnus detected the first hint of a guiding hand, shaping the species' destiny in ways both consequential and seemingly minor. So

careful and subtle was this hand, he wasn't even sure it was there, like a whisper in a thunderstorm.

And from this age of darkness came a light, finally revealed.

He bore many names, but only one that mattered.

Emperor.

One by one, the warlords of the past were destroyed, and a new empire grew from the ashes of the old. Into this Age of Unity was born the Imperium, the greatest empire the galaxy had ever seen.

Magnus watched events unfold in ways he had studied as a callow youth as the rapidly unspooling history of Earth finally caught up to events he had lived through. He saw the Expeditionary Fleets launched from the Field of Winged Victory within the Emperor's Palace, a place he hardly recognised, such was its tiny scale compared to what sprawled over the mountains now.

One by one, the lost cradles of civilisation were brought back into the fold, the forgotten branches of humanity spliced back into the body of the Imperium. His heart clenched as he waited for the moment where everything went wrong, when Horus fell on Davin.

But it never came.

The Legions reached the edges of the galaxy, and Magnus swelled with pride as Horus Lupercal and his Sons of Horus raised the Emperor's lightning-bolt banner on the last world to be brought to compliance.

This never happened, he said, his mind one with his father.

+No, but it should have. It so very nearly did.+

Magnus' mind flew back to Prospero, and he saw the world he knew and loved, its people flourishing, even passing on what they knew to visitors from all across the Imperium. His mind circled the planet, seeing fresh cities and arcologies, wonders he had never known, structures that bore all the hallmarks of Perturabo's wondrous designs.

Where am I? he asked, not finding himself within the Pyramid of Photep or any of the other cities of glass and gold.

+Look to Terra,+ said his father.

Back to the birthrock he flew, and there, deep in the heart of the world, Magnus found himself in the great cavern of machines, sat upon the same Golden Throne upon which he had so recently seen his father.

Fear touched Magnus as he remembered seeing a vision of this, his physical body ravaged and husked out by the unimaginable cost of maintaining the portal.

I have seen this, he said. ***It will kill me.***

+Look closer, my son.+

The vast doors before the throne were open, and a beatific light issued from what lay beyond. This was not the vision of his doom he had been shown, for here his face was serene and vacant, merely a vessel of flesh and blood. His subtle body was entirely absent.

His father felt his confusion.

+Your spirit is by my side, as it is now. We fly the Great Ocean as explorers of the furthest reaches of consciousness. Masters of time and space. As we always dreamed.+

Why show me this? It never happened, and only twists the knife of regret deeper.

+The past is set, but not all futures are lost, no matter how broken they appear. This future, or at least a *version* of it, can still come to pass.+

It is too late for that.

His father's amusement washed over him.

+Do you think I would show you this if that were so?+

Magnus opened his eye, feeling the familiar weight of spirit returning to his body.

Their shared vision-space experienced time on a cosmic scale, but an

instant only had passed in the cavern beneath the Sanctum Imperialis.

Vulkan stood at the Emperor's side, the tension of his stance betraying the expectation he felt.

His father's eyes still burned gold, his last question still hanging between them.

'How?' asked Magnus. ***'How could such a future come to pass?'***

'It is a simple thing,' said the Emperor, and Magnus saw the tremors of strain at His brow, a measure of how much psychic effort it was taking Him to communicate so directly. 'Swear your oath of fealty to me once again.

Take your rightful place at my side and our combined powers will drive the betrayers from Terra. We will destroy them, and usher in a new era of crusade.'

'I thought you always hated that word?'

'I did,' admitted his father, 'but that was then. Our first endeavour was carried forward on hope, a venture to reforge a galactic culture that Old Night put asunder, to locate and rebuild our lost sons and daughters. *This* will be a war of vengeance and cleansing, a scouring of worlds and a ruthless doom to all our enemies.'

'And you want me to be part of this?'

'I do, my son,' said the Emperor, and His eyes shone even brighter. 'I *need* you by my side, because your soul is still your own and is still ruled by the better angels of your nature. I saw what you did above in the Great Observatory. You could have left all those people to die, but you did not.

You *could* not. Unlike your brothers beyond the walls, you are still my son.

Your mind was always the strongest of them all, but Chaos has wormed its way too deeply into their hearts and minds to ever be removed.'

'The Red Angel, the Pale King, Horus Lupercal, Lorgar, Curze, Alpharius, and the Phoenician, they are truly monsters now, but I still count Perturabo as my brother, still as your son. He is too stubborn to ever abase himself before powers he considers inferior. His soul is clad in cold iron.'

'And that is why he is lost to us,' said Vulkan. 'Perturabo has pledged himself to Horus, and you know as well as I that his word, once given, is unbreakable. He will not go back on that, not now, not ever. His ambition to humble Rogal consumes him.'

Magnus wanted to argue and defend his closest brother, but he knew

Vulkan was right. To bring down the greatest work of Rogal Dorn was the Lord of Iron's sole obsession. Now the Emperor's offer had been stated so boldly, Magnus realised that *this* was the missing piece of his soul. No sliver split from the whole would restore him, only belief in a higher cause and the urge to belong to something greater than himself.

To have *meaning*.

That was the last missing piece.

Then why do I hesitate?

'There's a price, isn't there?' he said at last. ***'No matter what the poets say, forgiveness isn't free. It always comes with a price.'***

‘It does,’ agreed the Emperor. ‘And it is a heavy price, but a necessary one. *Your* mind and body are still your own, but the warriors of your Legion are damned. In truth, they were damned the moment the first signs of the flesh change became manifest. Their bodies carry the seeds of their own destruction, and no gene-craft of mine nor the Selenar can undo it. You can come back to me, but your Legion cannot.’

Magnus felt a cold hand squeeze his heart, but his father was not yet done.

‘But I will build you a new Legion, a mighty host of warriors greater than any now living. Plans are already in motion to bring about their inception.

Soon, you will command warriors the likes of which the galaxy has never seen, whose flesh will be flawless, whose fists are steel and whose hearts are armoured in adamantium!’

‘You would give me a new Legion?’

‘I would, and they will be the pride of the new Imperium.’

Magnus said nothing, picturing this fantastical new future, one in which his Legion sons were free of corruption, free of the fear that dogged their every step. Free from the dark shadow within them all that threatened to consume them.

And he at his father’s side, leading these new warriors on a new crusade to reconquer the stars. This time they would not repeat the mistakes of the past. This time they would reshape the galaxy as it was meant to be.

It was all he had ever wanted… *And yet…*

‘How could I fight at your side, knowing I had condemned my sons to death?’ he said. ***‘I would look upon these new warriors and see in them the faces of my betrayed Legion. What kind of father would I be were I to forsake them? How could you ask this of me?’***

‘It is the only way, Magnus. In truth, your sons are already dead. Within no more than a few years rampant mutations will overtake even the strongest of them. One way or another they will die.’

‘I… I cannot abandon them, father,’ he said, his hands clenching into fists. ‘ ***Their fate is not yet set. I will find a way to save them. I*** **must .’**

‘Please, brother,’ said Vulkan, taking a step towards him. ‘Come back to us, I beg you.’

Magnus turned as he heard the clatter of legionary warplate, and the ratcheting of boltguns. Three warriors clad in the livery of the Salamanders Legion crested the summit of the great golden dais. Magnus felt their joy at seeing their gene-sire, but at first sight of the Emperor, they instinctively fell to their knees in adoration, all but overcome by His incredible presence.

Magnus turned back to Vulkan and said, ***‘Would you sacrifice them?***

Would you betray even **one** ***of them for your own desire?’***

‘I could not,’ he said, his deep tones heavy with grief and his right hand sliding down to the warhammer *Urdrakule* at his belt.

Magnus felt the end of his staff transform, becoming a bladed spear-tip once more.

‘Then why would you believe that **I** ***could?’*** he roared.

They moved at the same instant.

Magnus’ arm drew back to cast his staff at the Emperor. It was the perfect throw, his aim true and deadly. All his fury was bound into this strike.

Fury that his father had put this awful choice before him.

Fury that He believed it was an offer Magnus would ever accept.

But most of all, it was fury that he almost *had.*

Abidemi watched the burning spear fly from the Crimson King's hand, a lightning bolt cast by the arm of a demigod to slay the king of the gods. He could barely move, barely *think*. To be this close to the Master of Mankind all but robbed him of any independent thought or will. How could any man, Astartes or mortal, dare to move under such a gaze?

Vulkan's hammer swept up and smashed the spear from the air in a single blow. It spun away, but like a comet on its return orbit it arced back around again. Magnus snatched it back into his hand as Vulkan charged his fallen brother with a look that was a dreadful mix of hate and sorrow.

The two slammed together with the deafening thunderclap of god-engines

at war.

Abidemi dragged his head to the side and met the gaze of Barek Zytos. He too was held pinned by the might and majesty of the Emperor.

'What do we do?' he said.

'I don't know,' replied Abidemi.

Vulkan and Magnus tore at one another, one with thunderous, deafening blows from his hammer, the other with tearing slashes of a burning spear.

For them to come between warring primarchs would be suicide.

'This is what you saw, brother,' said Igen Gargo, his voice a whisper over the vox-bead in his ear. 'The drakes in fire. You have steered us true.'

Abidemi's hand closed on the hilt of *Draukoros*, picturing the stern, uncompromising features of Artellus Numeon. *He* would have known what to do.

Vulkan smashed his hammer into Magnus' hip, crushing bone and tearing muscle. In return Magnus buried the tip of his spear up through Vulkan's shoulder guard. It did not stop for the strength of the plate, but sliced cleanly through. Blood squirted but Vulkan gave no sign he even felt the wound.

'You are liars all,' screamed Magnus. ***'You promise forgiveness then make its acceptance impossible.'***

'You're wrong, Magnus,' retorted Vulkan. 'Your arrogance blinds you.'

'No!' roared Magnus, his hands wreathed in fire as he spun around Vulkan's every blow.

Abidemi had seen his primarch in battle before and knew he was a sublime close-combat specialist. Yet against Magnus, he moved as though hopelessly outclassed. Every feint was ignored, every killing strike turned aside with his spear, dodged or easily blocked.

'The sorcerer sees our father's every move before he makes it!' cried Gargo.

Abidemi wanted to rise, to charge to fight at their primarch's side, but his muscles would not obey him. For now, he was a mere observer to this struggle.

Magnus spun around Vulkan, and rammed his spear into his back. The flaming tip gouged his backplate before sliding clear. Vulkan made a quarter-turn to the left and Magnus cracked the butt of his staff against his brother's helmet. The metal split and spat sparks. Vulkan ducked the blade's return stroke and swung *Urdrakule* up in a pistoning blow.

It took Magnus under the chin and snapped his head back. His cheek imploded and he spat teeth and blood that was too vivid to be real. Vulkan barged inside his guard, pounding his hammer against his chest as though demolishing a wall.

The bronze of Magnus' breastplate buckled, one of the yellowed horns snapping off where it met the armour. Milky blood streamed down his chest, chunks of leather and metal flying from every impact. Magnus grinned, spinning backwards.

Vulkan followed as strips of gold and steel tore loose from the deck plates.

Magnus hurled them at Vulkan, buckled girders, sheet steel and looping lengths of cabling.

His hammer smashed them all aside, pushing through a hurricane of psychic force.

Magnus laughed, his hands extended to either side as he ripped steel cabling from the ground and machines of the golden dais. They whipped through the air, lashing around Vulkan's wrists and ankles. He fought them, but that only pulled them tighter. Magnus clenched his fists and the bindings drew taut.

The Salamanders knew Vulkan's warplate as the *Draken Scale*, legend-forged by the master smiters of Nocturne in their secret halls beneath Mount Deathfire. It had withstood the fury of Isstvan V and the violence of Konrad Curze.

But now it buckled.

Flames billowed from Magnus, the spectral heat of his witch-powers. His outline wavered, as though he fought against some inexorable pull from beyond.

Vulkan strained against his living bindings. Ceramite and steel flakes spalled from his armour as it crumpled under the force of Magnus' might.

His skin was sheened like polished onyx, streaked with sweat and lined with pain as he took step after ponderous step towards Magnus.

The spear of Magnus lifted into the air, its tip too bright to look upon.

'If I must be damned with my sons I will be full damned, brother.'

The Crimson King nodded and his spear leapt forward like an unleashed Marauder from the launcher of an embarkation deck. It punched through their sire's breastplate, tearing through his chest, heart and lungs before exploding from his back and arcing high into the air. Vulkan did not cry out or flinch. He kept going, pulling taut at the steel cutting through his armour and crushing the bones within. Step by step he persisted.

Abidemi screamed and surged to his feet, whatever spell had held him down broken at the sight of his gene-sire so mortally struck. His rising freed his brothers too, and Igen Gargo rose to his left, with Barek Zytos on his right a second later.

‘Free him,’ said Abidemi to Gargo.

Draukoros roared to life as Abidemi flanked their primarch. A blizzard of sleeting steel fragments surrounded Vulkan. It scored Abidemi’s armour like the caustic sands of the Burning Walk across the Pyre Desert.

He reached Vulkan’s outstretched right arm and swung *Draukoros* as Gargo hacked with his long-bladed spear. The black teeth bit through the steel hawser in a single blow, and the Lord of Drakes was free.

Like a storm front unleashed, he hurled himself at Magnus, his hammer striking for the sorcerer lord’s head. The corner of its killing face struck the primarch on the shoulder, but so titanic a blow was it, that he reeled and all that was kept aloft by his power fell in a metallic rain.

Blood masked his face, his single eye alight with power.

Vulkan’s arm pistoned forward.

Then, like a lightning bolt from the heavens, Magnus’ spear slashed down.

Aimed unerringly at Vulkan’s skull, it was a treasonous blow to end his legend in an instant.

Abidemi saw it a second before it struck, and his heart turned to ice.

Barek Zytos saw it even before that.

The giant Salamander rammed into his father, like a bull-drake on the charge.

Not even Vulkan himself could resist that ferocious impact. He rocked forward.

One step only, but life and death had hung on less.

Magnus' spear clove through Zytos, its fire splitting him from collarbone to pelvis. Blood exploded from his shorn halves as he fell, and Vulkan cried out to see his son taken from him.

He roared and swept up the hammer still gripped in Barek's hand before it hit the ground.

'No!' cried Abidemi.

Even Magnus looked shocked at Zytos' death.

Vulkan had only a fractional moment to seize the advantage, and he did not waste it.

Twice armed, hammer blow after hammer blow rained down on the Crimson King.

The first crushed his shoulder guard, the second buckled the moulded surface of his breastplate. The last of its curling horns splintered under his reverse stroke.

Vulkan spun low and a third blow destroyed Magnus' knee.

A fourth slammed into his side and shattered his ribs.

Magnus reeled, forced back in the face of this relentless fury.

Flames exploded from Vulkan's fists as he smashed his brother in the face again and again. He drove him to his knees. Magnus' crimson mane erupted in flames, his skin charring to black. Bone gleamed whitely as his flesh sloughed from his skull.

Abidemi and Gargo hacked at Magnus in vengeance for Barek Zytos.

Draukoros rose and fell, tearing scraps of radiant meat from Magnus, and Igen Gargo drove his spear in deep again and again as the enemy primarch roared in agony. His great eye was filled with blood, and it wept scarlet tears as the Salamanders cut him to pieces.

Magnus raised his hand, and Abidemi hacked it from his wrist with a looping stroke of *Draukoros*. It tumbled away as Gargo tore open his guts with a twisting thrust.

Milky white blood that could not possibly be blood sprayed from the wound. It poured from a score of mortal hurts and filled Magnus' throat. A gout of the stuff vomited from his mouth, and he looked up at Vulkan through his blood-filled eye.

'Is this the end?' he said.

The words were slurred and wet, spoken through a broken jaw and cheek, through shattered teeth and a gouged tongue. Through all the terrible hurts that ought to have killed him thrice over.

'It didn't have to be,' said Vulkan, genuine regret in his voice. 'You could have stood with us. You could have been my brother again.'

Magnus shook his head.

'The price was too high.'

'A thousand sons?' said Vulkan, still pleading with his brother. 'A

thousand already damned sons for the sake of the Imperium?'

'Even one was too many,' said Magnus.

The Crimson King grinned and tipped his head back.

But this was no gesture of surrender, no baring his throat to an executioner.

His blood-filled eye swam with an eldritch sapphire light, and his limbs ignited with blue and pink flames as his ruined body was lifted high into the air. The flames billowed like a pair of vast feathered pinions spread behind him.

The many grievous wounds he had suffered closed up in an instant, the skin reforming whole and unblemished. Bones reknit, severed arteries and veins

spliced together once more, and immaterial flesh reformed all across his body.

The shards of his armour flew back to him, clamping fast to his body in a form as seamless as it had been before the fight began.

The last sliver within the Crimson King that clung to the material realm was finally obliterated, his body willingly given to the infernal masters in the darkness of the warp.

He looked down upon the Salamanders, his eye pulsing with the sickly blue light of cancerous stars, poisoned light from worlds entirely given over to the Neverborn.

And with the deepest truth of his powers finally unleashed, the irresistible pull of the telaethesic ward plucked Magnus from the dungeon and banished him from the Sanctum Imperialis forever.

His last words hung in the air like a curse.

All is dust.

Far below, a lone wolf's howl echoed through the cavern as the bodies of the sorcerers were snatched away in a storm of sapphire flame. Bjarki howled in grief and anger as the malefic light faded away, leaving him alone with the bodies of his two pack-mates.

He howled for all the dead he had lost, and for all who were yet to die.

Behind him, Promeus approached. Warily, he laid a hand on Bjarki's icy shoulder guard.

The killing lust still strong within him, Bjarki bared his fangs.

'His name was Olgyr Widdowsyn, the shield bearer,' said Promeus. 'His name was Svafnir Rackwulf, the finest Woe-maker of Tra. Their deeds were

many, and I was honoured to witness many of them.'

‘This is not the place to give warriors of the *Vlka Fenryka* a sending,’

warned Bjarki. ‘And there is no one here to listen to their tales.’

Promeus looked up at the golden light shining down on them from above.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘There is.’

SIXTEEN

Never Forgive, Never Forget

She awoke with the same scream on her lips.

Stars wheeled above her, glittering pinpricks of light, swirling like a time-lapse of the night sky. She coughed blood and tried to sit up. It was harder than she imagined it would be.

Then she realised she was stuck to the ground, lying in a pool of dried blood.

Her blood.

Almost all of it, judging by the extent of the pool.

Like she always did at moments like these, she waited, listening. She had no idea how much time had passed since she’d last opened her eyes.

Darkness, silence.

Was it night? No, she was in a cavern far below the earth. She heard the washing in and out of a tide, the splash of objects falling in the water.

An underground cavern. Magnus the Red… A game of regicide.

Malcador…

Alivia pushed herself upright, wincing at the flare of pain between her shoulder blades, the tightness of new skin, the unfamiliarity of new organs, new bones.

Alivia got her legs under her and stood, her balance still off, a little unsteady.

She stood at the edge of the plaza between the oversized villas, except now there was a thick ivory tower at its centre. Still unsure of her balance, she slowly circled the tower. If it was an elevator shaft, there didn't appear to be a door.

She turned to the shore and walked back to the water's edge. The table and chairs where she'd played regicide against a primarch were scattered and broken over the shingle. Deep footsteps surrounded it, and she saw the brass casing of a single bolter shell.

Bending to pick it up, she sniffed the acrid propellant within.

Projectiles designed to kill legionaries made a horrifying mess of a baseline human.

The boltgun was a weapon designed by a psychopath.

Next to the shell, partly buried in the sand, was the smashed half of the regicide board and a trio of its carved playing pieces. She smiled as she saw which ones they were.

The Primarch, the contoured portion of its upper carving split away. Next to it lay the Emperor, the piece she had been about to move. It too was broken. Still whole, but the detail and subtlety of its workmanship was lost.

And lastly, the white Divinitarch, split in two.

Alivia clasped this last piece tightly, tears spilling down her cheeks.

She looked out over the water, looking for any sign of Malcador. Dust and rocks still fell from the roof of the cavern, and she wondered how much more it would take to bring this entire edifice crashing down. Whatever damage Magnus had wrought here had broken something fundamental to its structure,

and now the endless bombardments from above were working to finish its destruction. The waters of the subterranean sea glowed with sunken lights, but she could see no sign of Malcador.

But then she saw him, his husked and shrouded body washed up farther along the shore onto the black sands. His stick-thin limbs jutted like the blackened branches of an old tree struck by lightning, gnarled and burned from the inside out.

His hairless head lolled on his shoulders, turning to face her, and his eye sockets were black and empty.

Alivia moved along the beach towards the Sigillite's corpse and knelt beside him.

'Damn you,' she said. 'Damn every single last one of you.'

The tide threatened to carry the body out again, but Alivia grabbed the edges of Malcador's robe and dragged him a little farther up the sands.

There was no weight to his bones, and she laid him down beneath his staff

of office.

Alivia knelt beside him as the pain and horror of the Emperor's Acuity filled her once again. She wept bitter tears, cursing that she was part of its perpetuation. She wanted to walk out into the ocean until her strength gave out, until she sank into the darkness and her lungs filled with water.

But what would be the point?

She was cursed to return again and again, to live yet another evolution of this life.

Alivia tried to push the Emperor's visions aside, but they kept coming.

Furious ages of war, tides of xenospecies wreaking untold carnage, a vast and soulless regime – as bloody and cruel as it was possible to imagine.

But the alternative?

A universe of horror, of torture and disease, of wanton cruelty and bloodshed. It would be unending, torment from which the human race could never escape, for its enactors were no mortal foes, no psychotic empire that must inevitably fall. No, this was a time of immortal monsters wrought from the tortured psyches of the very people who suffered within it.

What the Emperor had shown her was little better, a dark future that was as horrifying a nightmare as it was possible to imagine, a time when human lives were all but meaningless, ashes of bone ground between the gears of history.

But at least they were *lives*. Even in this bleak reality, men and women still loved one another, still raised their children as best they could, still served something greater than themselves. They still clung to one another when the darkness closed in, and endured the unendurable, because that was what people did.

They lived, they survived, and they persisted.

But most of all, they *hoped*.

Amid all the cataclysms still to come, there were yet embers of light. She had seen a time when heroes long thought lost returned, when those embers took flight and began a final conflagration that made this spasm of rebellion look like a frontier brushfire war. The outcome of that future war was unknown, but that humanity would fight back was enough.

Alivia dug into the pocket of her blood-stiffened coat and pulled out the chapbook of stories that had been her constant companion for as long as she could remember.

Despite all Alivia's reprimands, Vivyen had marked her place by turning a page corner down. She had been reading *The Nightingale*, and the thought of her and Miska and Jeph sent a wave of grief through Alivia that threatened to break her there and then.

'My beautiful girls,' she sobbed. 'My brave man.'

She folded up the corner and flipped through the pages until she reached the story she sought. It was a good one. They all were, but this one had always been one of Alivia's favourites. She hadn't known why until now, and a thin smile creased the corners of her lips.

'In the forest, high up on the steep shore and not far from the open seacoast, stood a very old oak tree,' began Alivia. 'It was just three hundred and sixty-five years old, but that long time was to the tree as the same number of days might be to us.'

As she read, she felt the cold that never left her bones ease, and the tiredness that was her constant companion start to lift. As though by speaking the words aloud, she too felt the joy of the Ephemerals, the playful insects who lived out their entire existence around the tree in a single wondrous day. Though their time was short in comparison, they experienced the myriad joys of their lives in moments that were fleeting, yet no less miraculous.

A tidal warmth flowed from her in a gentle susurration, loosening itself from her bones and carried away in the river of her words. It felt liberating and comforting, like being slowly lowered into a cleansing bath.

Alivia then spoke of the old oak tree as it fell into its winter slumber and dreamed a most wonderful dream.

'It saw the knights of olden times and noble ladies ride through the wood on their gallant steeds, with plumes waving in their hats and with falcons on their wrists, while the hunting horn sounded and the dogs barked. It saw hostile warriors, in coloured dress and glittering armour, with spear and halberd, pitching their tents and again taking them down; the watchfires blazed, and men sang and slept under the hospitable shelter of the tree. It saw lovers meet in quiet happiness near it in the moonshine, and carve the initials of their names in the greyish green bark of its trunk.'

The book grew warm in her hands, its ancient binding rippling as if unseen currents ran through the ink and glue and pressed fibre of its pages. The words began to blur before her, as though they were becoming unmoored from where their wily old author had set them down.

Alivia thought of all the countless lives she had lived, the many deeds of which she was ashamed and the greater number of which she was proud. In ancient cultures, a soul's eventual fate was judged upon its entry to the afterlife: on a weighing scale against a feather, by some omnipotent deity, by kings of hell, or by some other esoteric means. A life was a ledger of deeds, both good and evil, generous and selfish, and Alivia just hoped hers was at least balanced a little in her favour.

The lights in the cavern dimmed, and she had to hold the book closer to her face in order to keep reading. In the old oak tree's dream, it saw the joy and happiness it had experienced over its long existence, but still it yearned for all those around it to rise up and know that same joy.

And so it spread its branches, to pass the potency of its vitality to those around it.

'And the old tree, as it still grew upwards and onwards, felt that its roots were loosening themselves from the earth. "It is right so; it is best," said the tree. "No fetters hold me now. I can fly up to the very highest point in light and glory. And all I love are with me, both small and great. All are here."'

She paused in the retelling, blinking and trying to remember what she was doing. There was a book in her hands, the blotched, liver-stained hands of an old woman, but the words on the page were a blur.

Alivia's eyes drifted closed before she reached the end of the story, where the old oak tree finally fell, its three hundred and sixty-five years ended like the single day of the Ephemera.

She floated between sleep and wakefulness, swaying on the shore until the book fell from her hands. The sound of it landing in the risen tide of the ocean awoke her, and she felt a hand at her elbow.

A voice spoke to her, the words muffled and pained.

'I wish…' said the voice, but grief overcame it before it could finish.

Alivia looked up and saw the face of an old man, thin-cheeked and weighted by some great concern. His eyes were so very old and so very sad.

She leaned into him, feeling the sharp angles of his thin body under the black robe he wore. They were wet and cold, but he was warm beneath them, and Alivia felt his arms enfold her. He held her tight as the sight of two small girls laughing and playing before her appeared vividly in her mind.

She smiled to see them, and tears filmed her eyes as they beckoned her onwards.

'All I love are with me,' she whispered. 'both small and great. All… are…

here…'

Alivia Sureka closed her eyes for the last time.

They watched over the fields of fire surrounding the Palace from the Mercury Wall. Black smoke and purple flames obscured the jagged-toothed ruins, but here and there towers of silver still stood amid the destruction.

Blazing storms wracked the horizon, and gibbering voices drifted on the burning anabatic winds carrying the stench of fyceline, blood and filth up from the traitor camps that sprouted like sores on the surface of the world.

Together with the surviving men and women of *Vulkan's Own*, Atok Abidemi and Igen Gargo stood in the shadow of the shell-battered wall's towers with Bödvar Bjarki, waiting for the next hammer blow to fall.

Three days had passed since the confrontation beneath the Sanctum Imperialis. Three days of enduring the incandescent fury of Constantin Valdor and his Custodians, three days of enduring demands to know how they penetrated the most secure portion of the Palace, of how they had evaded the patrols of his golden-armoured warriors.

They had no satisfactory answer to give him, and were only allowed to once more take their place in the battle lines when Malcador returned and ordered their release. The Sigillite had always borne a heavy burden, but something had changed within him, some soul-deep wound that would never heal, a debt he could never repay.

Valdor protested, insisting that he be made aware of any gap in his defence, but Malcador assured him that the weakness exploited by Magnus the Red was no more.

In the end, necessity won out.

To keep Astartes from the walls, even so paltry a number as three, could not be countenanced, and they were given tasking orders to the Mercury Wall. Malcador gave them the names of two others they might seek out, fellow lost and Legionless warriors with whom they might find common cause.

Vulkan remained below with the Emperor after taking their oaths not to reveal his presence beneath the Palace. Of Promeus, they had seen no sign,

and his fate would forever remain unknown to them.

‘I had hoped to return this blade to Nocturne,’ said Abidemi, gripping the hilt of *Draukoros* tightly as shapes began to move in the toxic smoke ahead of them. Towering shadows, monstrous in form, and howling with madness.

‘But that is a foolish hope now.’

Bjarki only nodded. He had said little since their release. The grief of his brothers’ deaths still hung heavy upon him, as did the final escape of the Thousand Sons sorcerer.

‘It is your blade now,’ said Igen Gargo. ‘Artellus Numeon is dead, and it now falls to you to kill in its name, to earn the right to bear its wrath.’

Abidemi nodded. ‘You’re right,’ he said, reaching out to snap one of the black teeth from the sword’s blade. Gargo’s eyes widened, but he said nothing as Abidemi handed it to Bjarki. The Space Wolf took the razor-edged drake tooth with a puzzled expression.

‘You once said we were bound together, Wolf and Drake,’ said Abidemi.

‘You wanted to cut my warplate to mark that.’

‘And you told me only artificers of your Promethean cult might work the armour of a Salamanders legionary.’

Abidemi looked out over the hellscape before the Palace.

‘You said your wyrd showed us so marked.’

‘So it did,’ said Bjarki.

‘Then mark us,’ said Abidemi. ‘For Barek Zytos. For Olgyr Widdowsyn.

And for Svafnir Rackwulf.’

Bjarki nodded, and with swift strokes carved the angular symbol of a roaring drake head, the Dread Biter. He turned to Gargo and raised an eyebrow.

Gargo nodded and Bjarki cut the same symbol into his armour, just over the heart.

With the inscription complete, Bjarki tucked the sword’s black tooth into a leather pouch at his waist and grinned wickedly at his two newest brothers.

‘Now we are wyrd-marked,’ he said. ‘And when the fight here is done, we will hunt down those who escaped our wrath together.’

First he took Abidemi’s wrist in the warrior’s grip, then Gargo’s.

They all turned at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Two Space Marines drew near, clad in silver and with the look of hunters.

Men with a purpose yet unfulfilled.

The first was a wolf-lean warrior with tanned, weather-beaten skin, close-cropped hair and a face of scars. Across his back was a murderous greatsword and at his waist was sheathed a standard-issue chainblade and a gladius that bore a chipped cobalt Ultima at its pommel.

The other legionary was pale-skinned and patrician, broad of shoulder and with a great eagle at his chest with singular aspect instead of the customary two. He too carried a hulking blade at his back.

‘I heard you did our father a great service,’ he said, his accent cultured and precise.

The first warrior stepped forward, his eyes moving from Wolf to Drakes.

He nodded, seemingly finding them worthy.

‘I am Garviel Loken,’ he said. ‘And this is Nathaniel Garro.’

It wasn’t supposed to be this way…

Magnus knelt before the crazed looking glass that had once stood in a far corner of his war-pavilion. Now it was alone amid the ruins of what had once been the Palatine Tower. The din of artillery surrounded him, and propellant fumes washed through the remains of the tower in stinking clouds. Cackling, daemonic things slithered in and out of perception, but Magnus ignored every distraction.

All his attention was fixed on the mirror and the broken-glass reflections it returned.

Since his ejection from his father’s presence, he had not moved from this place, as immobile as the statue he had climbed the mountains of Prospero to see in his youth.

It had long been a source of frustration to him that the mirror was incomplete, a symbol of his fractured nature, but now that it was whole again, he longed to take it up and shatter it upon the rock of this lightning-struck tower.

The transition from beneath the Palace to the ruins beyond the walls had not been gentle and had almost ended his already mortally wounded sons.

Menkaura and Amon’s lives had hung by the slenderest thread, and required the arts of his greatest Pavoni adepts to save.

Ahriman had needed only the skill of the chirurgeons, but something in his favoured son had broken within the Palace. Magnus could not yet tell what it was, but feared for what it might mean for the future.

His mirrored reflections stared back at him, but where they had once shown him his myriad faces, the aspects of his soul in all their varied splendour and horror, now they showed but a single visage, the one he had worn since his refusal of his father's offer.

At the centre of the looking glass, a single, teardrop-shaped shard of glass had been missing from the frame, but in its place was now a daemonglass flect that fit the gap, but which Magnus knew was wrought from material inimical to this world and all within it.

Sickly colours smeared across its surface like a film of promethium on water, and thin strands of that impossible light flowed slowly along the cracks between the shards. The reflected images closest to this new addition were already stained by this creeping power, and it would not be long before the entire mirror was tainted by the shimmering warp light.

Strangely, the thought did not displease him.

A figure entered his peripheral vision, a legionary in the livery of the Sons of Horus, with a crest of feathers across the chest of his sea-green plate.

Magnus felt his wariness at approaching so close to a wounded primarch, but his soul was a dutiful one, maliciously loyal and brutally effective.

'My lord,' he said. 'My name is Kinor Argonis, equerry to the Warmaster.'

'I know who you are, Argonis Unscarred,' said Magnus, finally turning from the immaterial mirror. ***'What do you want?'***

'I bring word from the Warmaster,' said Argonis. 'He sends for you.'

'And what does my brother want? What is the intent behind his

summons?'

Argonis paused, sensible enough to know a lie would be dangerous.

‘A new front opens in the war, and Lupercal wishes to know if you are with him.’

Magnus rose to his full height, and Argonis stepped back, awed and not a little afraid of this new and terrible form of the Crimson King in his aspect of war.

‘Go to him, Argonis,’ said Magnus. ***‘And tell him I am with him until the very end.’***

AFTERWORD

It’s fair to say I’ve written quite a bit about Magnus the Red.

Both *A Thousand Sons* and *The Crimson King* were weighty tomes, and there’s been more than a few short stories, a couple of audios and a Crusade-era novella before now, so it’s safe to assume I must have something of an affinity with Prospero’s most infamous son. I’ve given quite a bit of thought to why that is, and I think it’s because I *like* Magnus. I like him because I find him, of all the primarchs – strangely, given his appearance – the most human of them all.

Magnus is the kind of person I could see sitting around some imaginary dinner table of my favourite people as we eat good food, drink rich red wine, and set the world to rights. With Corvidae clarity, I can see an evening of us all drinking into the wee small hours and talking about stories and what they can teach us: myths, cosmology, religion, history, psychology, arcana… and more besides.

Because Magnus isn’t here to show off how much he knows, he’s here to *share* what he knows, to pass on the joy of that knowledge without bludgeoning you with it. But it’s more than just being the cleverest person in the room, it’s also being the most curious, as Magnus is there to *learn* as much

as he is to teach. He wants to know what *you* know, to see how the world looks from behind *your* eyes, because that helps him grow a fuller picture of the universe in his mind.

And at the end of that imaginary night, the dinner guests would each wend their way home, a little more humble than they were before, leaving, as

Coleridge says, 'sadder and wiser…'

But that was Magnus in his prime, before the order of the galaxy was sent into a tailspin.

I wanted this story to be a culmination of the arc begun at the end of *A Thousand Sons* and continued in *The Crimson King*, the tale that brings Magnus fully into the Warmaster's camp. One of the most enjoyable, and necessary, aspects of writing stories set within the Horus Heresy and Siege of Terra is finding ways to add hidden layers within the stories we all know and love. The histories of such days speak of the grandiose scale of the terrible battles and the sweeping narratives of great heroes and their mighty deeds. But every war, every battle, every struggle of blades is made up of a thousand instances where fate might have turned, a host of moments that no one even suspected occurred.

One such moment was the ultimate sacrifice of Alivia Sureka. I first wrote Alivia in *Vengeful Spirit*, and I'd always had an ending of this sort in mind for her, but when it came time to write *that* scene, I found myself wholly reluctant to set it down. I'd come to love Alivia over the course of her journey from Molech to Terra, but each of the Perpetuals has their own singular purpose in fate's narrative, and this was hers. I will miss her.

And as events hurtle us towards the inevitable confrontation between Horus and the Emperor, I was able to weave a number of other threads together from previous books. Bringing Bjarki's watch pack and the Draakswards from Nick Kyme's Salamanders books together had a nice symmetry, and it was a great pleasure to propel them to where I needed them to be for this book and stories beyond. This won't be the last you see of them, I assure you.

But the key turning point of this drama would be the potential for one of the Traitor primarchs to come back to the Emperor. That was the conceit at the heart of this book, the pivotal event, the Black Swan moment that could have changed the course of the galaxy had a single decision gone the other way. Among those who'd joined the Warmaster's rebellion, only Magnus seemed like he might conceivably be able to return to the fold. Would it be complicated? Yes. Fraught with peril and likely fierce resistance from his loyalist brothers? Almost certainly, but it was a delicious thought, a moment I felt had the greatest potential to sway the course of the final Siege of Terra had it only gone the way we might have wished it to.

Putting Magnus face to face with the Emperor in order to finally rip away the shroud of untruths lying between them was too juicy a concept to pass up. One of the features of a tragic hero is that they're oblivious to their faults; they don't see the ambition, the jealousy, or whatever flaw in their character will ultimately doom them. But here, below the vaults of Terra, Magnus can no longer deny the truth: that his hubris and absolute belief that he knew better than everyone was a falsehood, a lie he told himself to justify all he'd done. And when confronted by such truths, it hurts to know that all the excuses you've made for yourself are worthless.

The Crimson King is a primarch who believes himself in control of his destiny, so being forced into a decision by the actions of others is anathema to him. In all that's unfolded, he never *chose* the path of treachery he found himself upon, which – for a primarch like Magnus – is what rankles the most. He and his Legion have been defined by what others have done to them, and this story marked the point where Magnus said, 'No more,' and chose his own path. Undoubtedly, it wasn't the one he wanted, wasn't the one he'd have wished for, but in the end, seeing what the cost of redemption would be, Magnus did the honourable thing and stood by his Legion, even at the cost of his soul.

In the end, that was what I loved about telling this story – that Magnus eventually damned himself by doing the right thing in refusing to abandon his sons, as any father should.

And, you know what… I'd *still* like to have him as a dinner guest at my table.

So, I'll light the candles, intone the words of summoning, and set a glass of Ahriman's Diemenslandt vintage wine on the table in anticipation of his arrival…

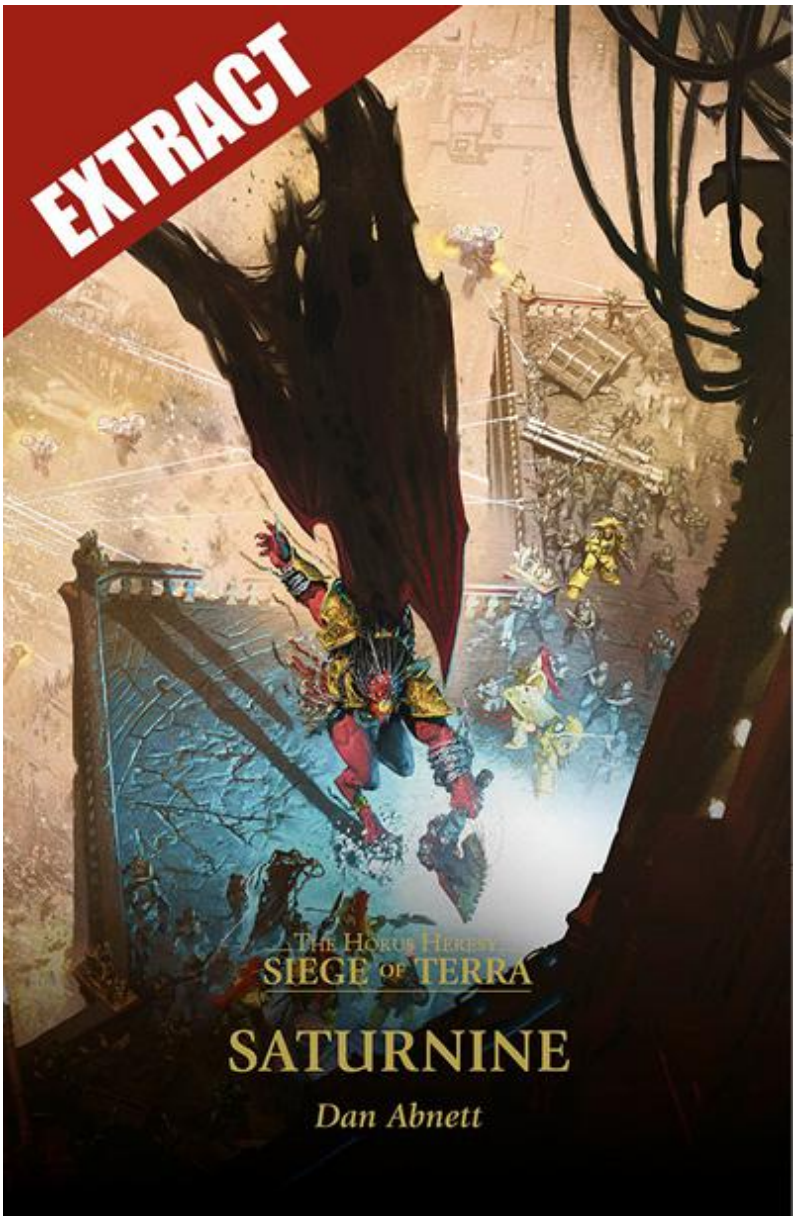
Graham McNeill

Los Angeles, 2019

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham McNeill has written many titles for The Horus Heresy, including the Siege of Terra novellas *Sons of the Selenar* and *Fury of Magnus*, the novels *The Crimson King* and *Vengeful Spirit*, and the *New York Times* bestselling *A Thousand Sons* and *The Reflection Crack'd*, the latter of which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology.

Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written the *Forges of Mars* trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the Warhammer Horror novella *The Colonel's Monograph*. For Warhammer, he has written the Warhammer Chronicles trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.



An extract from *Saturnine.*

There's a bond stronger than steel to be found in the calamity of combat.

Willem Kordy (33rd Pan-Pac Lift Mobile) and Joseph Baako Monday (18th Regiment, Nordafrik Resistance Army) had found that out in the span of about a hundred days. They had met on the sixth of Secundus, in the crowds swarming off the Excertus Imperialis troop ships at the Lion's Gate.

Everyone tired and confused, lugging kit, gaping at the monumental vista of the Palace, which most had never seen before, except in picts. Officers shouting, frustrated, trying to wrangle troops into line; assembly squares outlined in chalk on the concourse deck, marked with abbreviated unit numbers; adjutants hurrying along the lines, punch-tagging paper labels to collars – code marker, serial, dispersal point – as if they were processing freight.

'I swear I have never seen so many people in one place,' Joseph had remarked.

'Nor me,' Willem had replied, because he'd been standing next to him.

Just that simple. A hand offered, shaken. Names exchanged. Willem Kordy (33rd Pan-Pac Lift Mobile) and Joseph Baako Monday (18th Regiment, Nordafrik Resistance Army). The brackets were always there, with everybody. Your name became a sentence, an extension of identity.

'Ennie Carnet (Fourth Australis Mechanised).'

'Seezar Filipay (Hiveguard Ischia).'

'Willem Kordy (Thirty-Third Pan-Pac Lift Mobile). This is Joseph Baako Monday (Eighteenth Regiment, Nordafrik Resistance Army).'

No one stopped doing it. It was too confusing otherwise. No one came from here, no one knew the place, or anybody except the rest of their unit.

They brought their birthplaces, regions and affiliations with them, in

brackets, like baggage trains after their names. Like comforting mementos.

It became second nature. On the eleventh, Kordy found himself saying, as he reported to his own brigade commander, 'Willem Kordy (Thirty-Third Pan-Pac Lift Mobile), sir.'

'Colonel Bastian Carlo, Thirty-Third Pan-Pac Lift Mo– What the shit is wrong with you, soldier?'

They lugged their brackets into the war with them, along with their packs and munition bags and their service weapons, like a little extra load. Then they had to cling to them, because once the fighting started, everything quickly lost definition and the brackets were all they had. Faces and hands got covered in mud and blood, unit badges got caked in dirt. By the twenty-fifth, the long red coats of the 77th Europa Max (Ceremonial) were as thick with filth as the green mail of the Planalto Dracos 6-18 and the silver breastplates of the Nord-Am First Lancers. Everyone became indistinguishable, alive or dead.

Especially after the gate fell.

Lion's Gate space port fell to the enemy on the eleventh of Quintus. It was a long way from where they were, hundreds of kilometres west. Everything was a long way from everything else, because the Imperial Palace was so immense. But the effects were felt everywhere, like a convulsion, like the Palace had taken a headshot.

They were on the 14th Line by then, out in the north reach of the Greater Palace. The 14th Line was an arbitrary designation, a tactical formation of twenty thousand mixed Excertus and Auxilia units holding positions to guard the western approaches to the Eternity Wall space port. When the Lion's Gate fell, cohesion just went, right across the 14th Line, right across everywhere. A series of heavy voids had failed, soiling the air in the surrounding zone with a lingering sting of raw static and overpressure. The aegis protecting the Palace had ruptured in a cascade, spreading east from the Lion's Gate, and the electro-mag blink of that collapse took down vox and noospheric links with it. No one knew what to do.

Commands from Bhab and the Palatine Tower were not updating. There was a mad scramble, a fall-back, evacuating dugouts and leaving the dead behind. Parts of the Lion's Gate space port were on fire, visible from leagues away. Traitor armies were shoving in from the south-east, emboldened by the news that the port had fallen. They were driving up the Gangetic Way unchecked, piling in across Xigaze Earthworks and the Haldwani Traverse bastions, swarming the enclosures at the Saratine and Karnali Hubs and the agrarian districts west of the Dawn Road. The units of the 14th Line could hear the rumble of approaching armour as they ran, like a metal tide rolling up a beach.

The sky was a mass of low smoke, scored through by the ground-attack aircraft making runs on the port-side habitations.

No one could believe that the gate had fallen. It was where they had all arrived, almost a hundred days before, and it had felt so huge and permanent. Joseph Baako Monday (18th Regiment, Nord afrik Resistance Army) had never seen a structure so magnificent. A vertical city that soared into the clouds, even on a clear day. Lion's Gate. One of the principal space ports serving the Imperial Palace.

And the enemy had taken it.

That meant the enemy had surface access inside the Eternity Wall, inside the Anterior Barbican. It had the critical operational capacity to start landing principal assault forces from the orbital fleet: heavy units, mass units, to reinforce the Terran traitor hosts that had begun the outer assaults.

'No,' Willem Kordy (33rd Pan-Pac Lift Mobile) told his friend. 'Not reinforce. Supplant. The first door of the Palace has opened.' An orbital artery had begun to pump. Until then, they'd faced men and machines.

Through the yawning hole of the Lion's Gate, other things could now arrive, the way cleared for their advance.

Traitor Astartes. Titan engines. And worse, perhaps.

'How could there be worse?' asked Joseph Baako Monday (18th Regiment, Nordafrik Resistance Army).

They tried to make their way from Southern Freight Quadrant to Angevin Bastion, approaching the top end of the Gangetic Way where it crossed Tancred and the Pons Montagne, in the hope of skirting the traitor armour that was reducing Gold Fane Bastion to rubble. Captain Mads Tantane (16th Arctic Hort) had nominal command, but they didn't need a leader. It was move as one, in support of each other, or die.

Some fled, discipline lost. They were cut down inside two hundred metres, or overtaken by the viral clouds. Others gave up. That was the worst thing to see. Anonymous troopers, their identities lost under a film of grease and mud, no

longer able to say their brackets, sitting in doorways, beside broken walls, in the stinking shadows of underpass revetments. A few put pistols in their mouths, or tugged the pins of their last grenades. But most just sat, ruined by despair and sleep deprivation, and refused to get up. They had to be left behind. They sat until death found them, and it never took long.

The rest, the still living, they tried to move. Vox and noospheric links remained dead. The constant flow of updating directives and deployment instructions had been choked off. They had to switch to Emergency and Contingency Orders, which had been issued on paper flimsies to all field officers. They were basic, spartan. For them, the units of the 14th Line, a curt general order written on a curl of paper, like a motto from a fortune cracker: 'In the event of breach or failure at 14th, withdraw to Angevin.'

Angevin Bastion and its six-kilometre line of casemates. Get behind that.

That was the hope. A new line. Captain Mads Tantane (16th Arctic Hort) had about seven hundred infantry with him in a long, straggling column that kept breaking into clumps. His seven hundred was just a small part of the eighty-six thousand loyalist Army personnel in retreat from Line 14, Line 15 and Line 18. Packs kept stumbling into each other as they struggled through the ruins, yelling names and brackets frantically to prevent mistaken engagement. Enemy fire was at least only coming from one direction: behind them.

Then it began to come from the flank too. From the north. Close by and heavy, pricking through the colonnades and the gutted buildings, stippling rockcrete, raising puffs of powder-dust from rubble slopes.

And killing people.

Their line, their ragged column, began to crumple. Some scattered and broke for cover, others turned, bewildered. Some fell, as though they were tired of standing up. They dropped heavily, like sacks of meal, and tilted at ungainly angles, their legs bent under them, poses only death could accomplish. Captain Mads Tantane (16th Arctic Hort) started yelling above the chatter of weapons fire, urging them on to Angevin, and a few of the troopers obeyed.

‘He’s a fool,’ said Joseph Baako Monday (18th Regiment, Nord afrik Resistance Army). ‘My friend Willem, don’t go that way! Look, would you? Look!’

The enemy had emerged. A wide, rolling line of traitor ground troops

surged through the ruined fringes of Gold Fane, spilling through broken archways, and across streets, and down spoil heaps, flowing like water through every gap they could find. They were chanting. Willem Kordy (33rd Pan-Pac Lift Mobile) couldn’t make out what. There was too much noise. But it was all one thing, voices lifted as one, a sound as ugly as the icons on the banners that wobbled and flapped over their ranks.

The kill-rate increased. Friends were dropping all around them. Willem Kordy (33rd Pan-Pac Lift Mobile) couldn’t tell who. A body twisted. Was that Jurgan Thoroff (77th Kanzeer Light) or Uzman Finch (Slovak 14th)?

Just a figure caked in mud, identity lost, no longer able to utter its brackets, no face left to wipe clean so that features could be discerned.

Smoke everywhere. Dust. Vaporised blood. Filthy rain. The chanting. The constant crack and rasp of weapons firing. The slap and scorch of impacts on stone and rubble. The hollow thump of impacts on meat. You knew when a body had been hit. A muffled punch came with an exhaled gasp as air was squeezed out of lungs. It came with the sharp stink of burned cloth and exit steam, the burned and atomised innards splitting skin to escape.

You learned the sound fast if you didn’t already know it, because it repeated a dozen times a minute.

Willem Kordy grabbed his friend’s sleeve and they ran together. Others ran too. There was no cover. They scrambled up a bank of rubble, rounds slapping the tangled debris around them. Joseph Baako Monday made the mistake of looking back. He saw– He saw that Captain Tantane had definitely gone the wrong way, and taken two hundred or more people with him. The traitor multitude had boxed them. He saw–

He saw taller figures pushing through the marching traitor files. Beast-giants armoured in black. He knew they were Astartes. War-horns bellowed through

the smoke-fog. More now, more giants. He saw– He saw these Astartes wore armour of dirty white, like spoiled cream.

Their pauldrons were black. Some had great horns. Some had cloth tied around their armour like smocks or aprons. He saw–

He saw the dirt was caked blood. He saw the aprons were human hides.

The Astartes in black slowed their advance. They let the Astartes in white rush ahead. They surged like dogs, charged like bulls. They weren't men, or even like men. The Astartes in black were upright, like handlers. The Astartes in white galloped, almost on all fours. They shrieked in berserk pain. They swung chainblades and war-axes that Joseph Baako Monday knew he could not have lifted. He saw– He saw them reach Captain Tantane's group. He saw Tantane and those around him screaming and firing to hold them at bay. And failing. The Astartes in white ploughed into the mass of them, through them, running them down like trains hitting livestock. Slaughter. Butchery. A huge cloud of blood-vapour billowed up the slope, coating stones like tar. The Astartes in black stood and watched, as if entertained. He saw– A hand on his arm.

'Come on!' Willem yelled into his face. 'Just come on!'

Up the slope, sixty, seventy of them, scrabbling up the rubble incline, sixty or seventy that had not made the mistake of following Captain Tantane. Up the slope, dragging each other when feet slipped, up the slope and onto what had once been the roofs of habitats. The horror below them. The war-horns booming. The grinding squeal of chainblades. Billowing clouds of clotting fog.

The roofs ran out. A huge structure had collapsed, leaving nothing but its frame of girders and spars rising from a sea of shattered masonry. A twenty-metre drop. They started to clamber out along the girders, the sixty or seventy of them, single file, walking or crawling along girders half a metre wide. Men slipped and fell, or were knocked off by shots from below. Some took others with them as they clawed to stay on. They had all passed through fear. Fear was redundant and forgotten. So was humanity. They were deaf from the noise and numb from the constant shock. They had entered a state of feral

humiliation, of degradation, mobbing like animals, wide-eyed and mindless, trying to escape a forest fire.

Willem nearly fell, but Joseph clung to him and got him to the far side, the roof of an artisan hall. They were among the first to make it. They looked back at their friends, men and women clinging like swarming ants to the narrow girders. They reached out, grabbed hands, brought a few to safety.

Jen Koder (22nd Kantium Hort), Bailee Grosser (Third Helvet), Pasha Cavaner (11th Heavy Janissar)…

War-horns boomed. Bigger horns. Deeper, howling sounds that shook the breastbone. Two dozen streets away, true giants loomed out of the haze.

Titan engines, glimpsed between the soaring towers as they strode along,

demolishing walls and whole buildings, black, gold, copper, crimson, infernal banners displayed on the masts of their backs. Each was like a walking city, too big to properly comprehend. Their vast limb-weapons pulsed and fired: flashes that scorched the retina, static shock that lifted the hair, heat-wash that seared the skin like sunburn even from two dozen streets away.

And the noise. The noise so loud, each shot so loud, it felt as though the noise alone could kill. At each discharge, everything shivered.

We will die now, thought Joseph, and then laughed out loud at his own arrogance. The giant engines weren't coming for him. They didn't know he even existed. They were striding west, parallel to him, driving through the harrowed streets to find something they could kill or destroy that was worth their titanic effort.

The sixty or seventy of them had become thirty or forty. They slithered down slopes of scree and broken glass. No one had a clue where they were going. No one knew if there was anywhere left that could be gone to.

Buildings around them were burning or blown out, the streets buried in a blanket of debris.

'We should fight,' said Joseph.

‘What?’ asked Willem.

‘Fight,’ Joseph repeated. ‘Turn around, and fight.’

‘We’ll die.’

‘Isn’t this already death?’ asked Joseph. ‘What else are we going to do?

There’s nowhere to go.’

Willem Kordy wiped his mouth and spat out dirt and bone dust.

‘But what good can we do?’ asked Bailee Grosser. ‘We saw what–’

‘We did see,’ said Joseph. ‘I saw.’

‘We won’t measure it,’ said Willem.

‘Measure what?’ asked Jen Koder. Her helmet was so badly dented, she couldn’t take it off. Under the crumpled rim, blood ran down her neck.

‘Whatever we are able to do,’ said Willem. ‘We’ll die. We won’t know.

Whatever we do, however little, we won’t know. That doesn’t matter.’

‘Yes,’ said Joseph. He looked at their faces. ‘It doesn’t matter. We came here to fight. Fight for Him, in His name. Fight for this place. You saw how many people came. At the space port, when we arrived. So many people.

Did anyone actually think they would do something significant? In person?’

Willem nodded. ‘Collective effort. That’s the point. If I break, or you break, then everyone will break, one by one. If I stand, and you stand, we die, but we are standing. We don’t have to know what we do, or how little it is. That’s why we came here. That’s what He needs from us.’

No one said anything. One by one they got up, picked up their weapons, and followed Joseph and Willem down the street, picking their way over rubble, heading back the way they had come.

The Space Marine was in their path, hazed by a draw of thick smoke.

Scarred siege shield propped in one hand, longsword resting across a huge shoulder guard. Plate dented and scored, even the ornate laurels on the breast. Eyes, slits of amber throbbing in the mauled visor.

Their weapons came up.

'Where are you going?' it asked.

'Back. To fight,' said Joseph.

'Correct,' it said. 'That's what He needs from us.'

'You… heard me?'

'Of course. I can hear a heart beating at a thousand metres. Follow me.'

The legionary turned. Its armour and siege shield were yellow.

'I am Joseph Baako Monday (Eighteenth Regiment, Nordafrik Resistance Army),' Joseph called out.

'I don't need to know,' the legionary replied, without glancing back. 'And show some damn noise discipline.'

'I need you to know,' said Joseph.

The legionary halted, and looked back. 'That doesn't matter–'

'It matters to me,' said Joseph. 'It's all we have. I am Joseph Baako Monday (Eighteenth Regiment, Nordafrik Resistance Army).'

'I am Willem Kordy (Thirty-Third Pan-Pac Lift Mobile),' said Willem.

'Adele Gercault (Fifty-Fifth Midlantik).'

'Jen Koder (Twenty-Second Kantium Hort).'

The Space Marine let them all speak. Then it nodded.

‘I am Camba Diaz (Imperial Fists). Follow me.’

‘Wait,’ said Archamus, seeing them approach, but not looking up, one finger raised for patience.

Niborran, Brohn and Icaro waited. They watched the master of Dorn’s Huscarls work at his station, carefully reviewing the data-feed. His eyes

didn’t blink. They waited. The constant motion and noise of the Grand Borealis encircled them. It was the first time any of them had not spoken in over a day. Waiting seemed wrong. High Primary Solar General Saul Niborran, Militant Colonel Auxilia Clement Brohn, Second Mistress Tacticae Terrestria Sandrine Icaro of the War Courts… They were people you did not keep waiting, not at this time, not in this extremity.

Unless you were in command of the warzone, running it from Bhab Bastion in the Sanctum Imperialis, the chosen proxy of the Lord Praetorian, and thus carrying, temporarily, the ultimate authority of Dorn.

Archamus, Imperial Fists, Master of the Huscarls, Second Of That Name, finished his review and sat back slightly. He looked at them. They were the senior duty officers of the Day Hundred rotation.

‘Begin,’ he invited.

‘Where is Dorn?’ asked Niborran immediately.

Archamus’ eyes narrowed very slightly. At a nearby station, Captain Vorst looked up with a frown. Archamus saw the look, dismissed it with a small gesture. *Keep your seat*.

Niborran breathed deeply. He was tired.

‘Your forgiveness, sir,’ he said. ‘Let me amend. Where is the Lord Praetorian?’

‘Occupied elsewhere,’ said Archamus. ‘Begin.’

Niborran winced. He rubbed his augmetic eyes quickly with a knuckle.

The silver socket frames gleamed against his dark skin, but the eyes within seemed dull. He took out his slate.

‘We have run analysis of–’

‘How is he occupied?’ asked Brohn.

‘What?’ asked Archamus.

‘Leave it, Clem,’ Niborran murmured.

‘I won’t. How is he occupied? Right now? One hundred and more days of this, and the deepest shit yet, drowning in our own blood, and he’s *occupied*?’

Archamus’ face was expressionless. ‘Consider your tone please, colonel,’

he suggested.

‘Screw my bastard tone, lord.’

Archamus rose. Vorst had risen too, heaving his yellow-plated bulk out of his seat. Again, Archamus signalled him to return to work with a brief

gesture.

‘We are all very tired,’ said Niborran quickly. ‘Very tired. Tempers fray and–’

‘You don’t look tired,’ Brohn said to Archamus. ‘Not at all.’

‘Bred that way,’ said Archamus. In the first hundred days he’d stood three tours on the lines. The grazes and dents on his yellow plate hadn’t been finished out and were there for all to see. But no, he didn’t look tired. He looked Astartes, the way he always did. Unmoving, as solid as a statue. He didn’t look tired the way these three humans did, with their hollow eyes and drawn cheeks and shaking hands.

‘I will allow you some latitude, colonel,’ he said. ‘The circumstances–’

‘The circumstances are shit, and getting shittier by the second, and Dorn is absent. He is supposed to be running this. He’s supposed to be the bastard genius–’

‘That is now enough,’ said Archamus.

‘The Praetorian’s absence is concerning,’ said Niborran. ‘Brohn is out of line, but his sentiment is–’

‘We’re screwed,’ snapped Brohn. ‘His plan is splitting at the seams. Lion’s Gate is done. They’re in. Inside Anterior. The aegis is blown in eight places.

They’ve got engines on the ground and they’re walking. Our plan is on fire.

It’s gone to shit–’

‘Get out.’

The words were a whisper, a hiss, but they cut like acid through metal.

Everyone in the Bhab strategium fell silent. No voices, just the chatter and babble of cogitators and the crackle of vox monitor stations. Eyes averted.

Jaghatai Khan stepped up onto the central platform. How anyone or anything so big could have entered the Grand Borealis without being heard, or could have walked silently from the chamber arch across the plasteel deck, in full, fur-draped armour plate…

He towered over them. There was blood on his cheek, beard, gorget, left pauldron, breastplate. It matted his cinched-back mane, freckled his ermyet furs, and ran down his left thigh-guard. It wasn’t his. His left hip was scorched back to bare metal from a melta burn.

‘Get out,’ he repeated, looking down at Brohn.

‘Colonel Brohn is tired, lord, and spoke poorly,’ Niborran began.

‘I don’t give a shit,’ said the Great Khan.

‘My lord,’ Niborran pressed. ‘Colonel Brohn is a senior and decorated Army officer, and an essential part of the–’

‘Not a single shit,’ said the Great Khan.

Niborran glanced at the deck. He sighed.

‘His question was insolently framed,’ said Niborran flatly, ‘but his point was valid.’

He looked the primarch in the eyes. He did not waver.

‘My lord,’ he added.

‘You too,’ said the Great Khan. ‘Get out.’

Brohn glanced at Niborran. Niborran shook his head. He tossed his slate onto the desk, turned and walked out. Brohn followed.

The Great Khan didn’t even watch them leave.

‘Which seniors are on the next rotation?’ he called out to the chamber.

‘Find them. Wake them. Get them here.’

Several adjutants jumped up and hurried out. The Great Khan turned to Archamus.

‘Where’s Dorn?’ he asked.

‘In council with the Sigillite and the Council.’

‘Get him here,’ he said. He glanced at Icaro. ‘You. Icaro. Begin.’

Icaro cleared her throat. ‘Aegis failure in eight sectors,’ she said. She swept her hand across the face of her dataslate like a sower scattering seed, and threw the data up onto the display. Ugly blobs blossomed across the northern and central areas of the vast Palace map.

‘Repairs?’ asked the Great Khan.

‘Pending. Voids sixty-one and sixty-two are beyond salvation. Lion’s Gate Port remains wide open. Bulk landers are setting down along the northern upper platforms at a rate of sixty an hour. Vox and noospherics are interrupted in those sectors and adjacent zones.’

She cast more blobs onto the holofield.

‘Multi-point auspex confirms engines walking here, here and here. Legio Tempestus. Legio Vulpa. Perhaps Legio Ursa too. Progressing to Ultimate Wall, Anterior Wall, and into Magnifican.’

‘They have one, they want another,’ said the Great Khan. Archamus nodded.

‘I believe so, lord,’ he said.

‘Army lines are fracturing across the northern reaches,’ said Icaro.

‘Assault is a primary factor, traitor hosts driving up from the south. They have Astartes support.’

‘On the ground?’ asked the Great Khan.

‘On the ground, in force,’ she confirmed. ‘World Eaters, Iron Warriors, Thousand Sons, Luna Wolves–’

‘They’re not called that any more,’ said the Khan.

‘My apologies, lord. But I won’t use his name,’ she replied.

‘Just use numbers,’ said Archamus gently.

‘Yes, lord. Fifteenth, Seventeenth, Fourth, Sixteenth, Third. Perhaps others. Assault pressure is the primary factor, but Army cohesion is disrupted by the loss of vox and comm-channels. We can’t issue orders to the places where orders are most needed.’

She looked at the primarch.

‘The merits or demerits of the Praetorian’s defence plan are moot all the while said plan cannot be implemented,’ she said.

The Great Khan nodded, and tried to comb dried blood out of his moustache with his fingers. ‘And daemons?’ he asked.

‘Probably very many,’ she said. There was a tiny wobble in her voice.

‘Probably the most significant threat to the Sanctum Imperialis Palatine.

But they are not detectable by our systems.’

‘That assessment is confirmed,’ said Archamus.

‘We are relying on sighting reports,’ she said, ‘which are… unreliable and confused. And dependent on vox. We must trust, I suppose, in our lord the Emperor’s will to keep them at bay.’

‘That trust is never unfounded,’ said the Great Khan. He looked at the shimmering, updating chart. ‘They’re coming to our doors. Right to our doors. Lion’s Gate, Ultimate Wall. But they want that too.’

He pointed to the icon that represented the Eternity Wall space port.

‘Agreed,’ said Archamus.

‘If they take that, they have both principal space ports in the northern reaches. Double the landing capacity.’

‘Surely they’ll concentrate on the Sanctum now?’ Icaro asked. ‘The added capacity is useful, but Lion’s Gate is closer, its landing volume is immense, and they’re at our throats already.’

‘No, they want it,’ said the Great Khan. ‘Get as much on the ground as they can to knock us down. It’s what I’d do.’

‘And it’s what I’d do,’ said Dorn. He stood at the foot of the platform steps looking up at them. ‘And it’s what I know our brother Perturabo would do.

Maximise landing capacity. Deprive us of orbital access. I am sure this is as Horus has instructed.'

'They want them both,' said Jaghatai Khan.

'They want them both. They want everything,' said Dorn.

The Great Khan nodded. He looked at Dorn.

'So, there you are,' he said.

'Here I am,' said Dorn. 'I had business elsewhere. Ironic… it's usually you who slips away and can't be found.'

Jaghatai Khan did not soften. The Lord Khagan would clearly not be mollified with gentle good humour.

'What now, brother?' asked the Great Khan.

'I have been examining the latest variables,' Dorn said, joining them on the platform. 'Each move our opponent makes reveals more of his intention.

I'm beginning to see the Lord of Iron's strategy in some depth, which means I can predict where–'

'We do not need to predict,' said the Khan simply.

'This is a complex, multi-aspect battle sphere, brother,' Dorn began, then cursed himself inwardly. Jaghatai Khan's martial doctrines were very different from his own, but the Great Khan was a peerless, precise and subtle warrior. He did not deserve condescension. He did not need to have complexity explained to him the way humans did.

Jaghatai Khan shook his head. He looked weary, and that in itself was concerning. For a primarch to look tired…

'He wants our father,' said the Khan quietly. 'He wants unhindered access to the Palace. He has one foothold, he wants another. It is not complex, Rogal,

not any more. Eternity Wall Port must be defended and held. Lion's Gate Port must be retaken. It is an offence they have claimed it at all.'

'It was unavoidable,' said Dorn.

'I'm not blaming you, Rogal,' said the Khan. He sighed. 'We must hold the ports. Deny them access. What forces they have already landed can be contained and butchered.'

'Jaghatai,' said Rogal Dorn. He cleared his throat, as if considering what to say next. 'I assure you, I have weighed every option. I applaud your determination, but it's not quite as simple as you–'

He cut short. Jaghatai Khan was gazing at him. There was a hardness in his look that made Icaro take a nervous step back.

'I think you misunderstand me, Rogal,' the Great Khan said. 'I am going to take Lion's Gate Port back. I'm not asking you. I came here to tell you what I'm about to do.'

She asked, 'Why are you kneeling?'

He was renewing his oath of moment in a dingy cubicle a million light years from the place she'd first watched him perform the cere mony. His private arming chamber on the *Spirit*, that seemed like false memory, something he'd imagined but which had never been true. The metal walls lacquered pale green, the smell of lapping powder, the noise from embarkation decks outside. Those images didn't belong to him any more.

The oaths of moment pinned to the wall under the stencilled eagle, those too. They belonged to someone else. They were deeds another man had done, and he was dead.

'To show respect,' he replied.

'Who are you kneeling to?' Always so insistent, so curious.

He shrugged. He had laid out two blades. Rubio's sword looked dull in the candlelight. The force sword's blade was inactive. It was an old Ultramarines

weapon, gladius-pattern, a form he was familiar with. It still had the Ultima mark on the hilt.

The Mk IV long-pattern chainsword beside it had a dent across the cowling and several teeth that needed to be re-set or replaced. A repair unit stood ready, beside the frame supporting his plate. The pale grey of the battered armour segments was the colour of old bone in the gloom, like a moon catching only back-scattered sunlight.

'Kneeling is an act of respect or fealty,' she remarked. 'Or it is an act of reverence and devotion.'

'It's not devotion,' he replied, becoming annoyed at her interruption and her questions. 'There are no gods. We burned that lie.'

'Then fealty… but there is no one here to kneel to, so the fealty is worthless.'

'The Emperor is everywhere.'

'Is He?' She looked amused. 'You kneel to the idea of Him, as an act of faith? So which is it, fealty or devotion? Have you destroyed false gods just

to build another?'

'He is not false,' he snapped. The floor shook briefly. Dust sifted down from the trembling ceiling. The closest batteries and casemates had resumed firing, and their mass recoil was flexing the fabric of the Palace.

'Is He a god, then?' she asked. She brushed away dust that had fallen onto the pauldrons of his racked armour.

'There are daemons now, so…' he began.

'So there must be gods too?'

'I didn't say that. What do you want, Mersadie?'

'To live. Too late for that now.'

The candles guttered.

What oath are you making? Loken imagined her asking. He wondered how he would explain. Oaths of moment were just that – specific, taken before battle. All those he had sworn, almost everything he had ever sworn apart from his devotion to the Emperor, had long been voided. He had decided to make his own, a crude and simple oath, enough to keep him going through whatever part of his life remained.

'I've seen slogans daubed on walls, in the lower parts of the Palace Precinct,' he said to the empty cubicle. 'A few to begin with, then more. I think the Imperial Army garrisons and conscripts scrawl them up. A mantra.

I adopted it as my oath. Simple. Encompassing, and easy to remember. Just three words.'

He showed the scrap of parchment to the empty air, to the ghost memory of her presence.

To the death.

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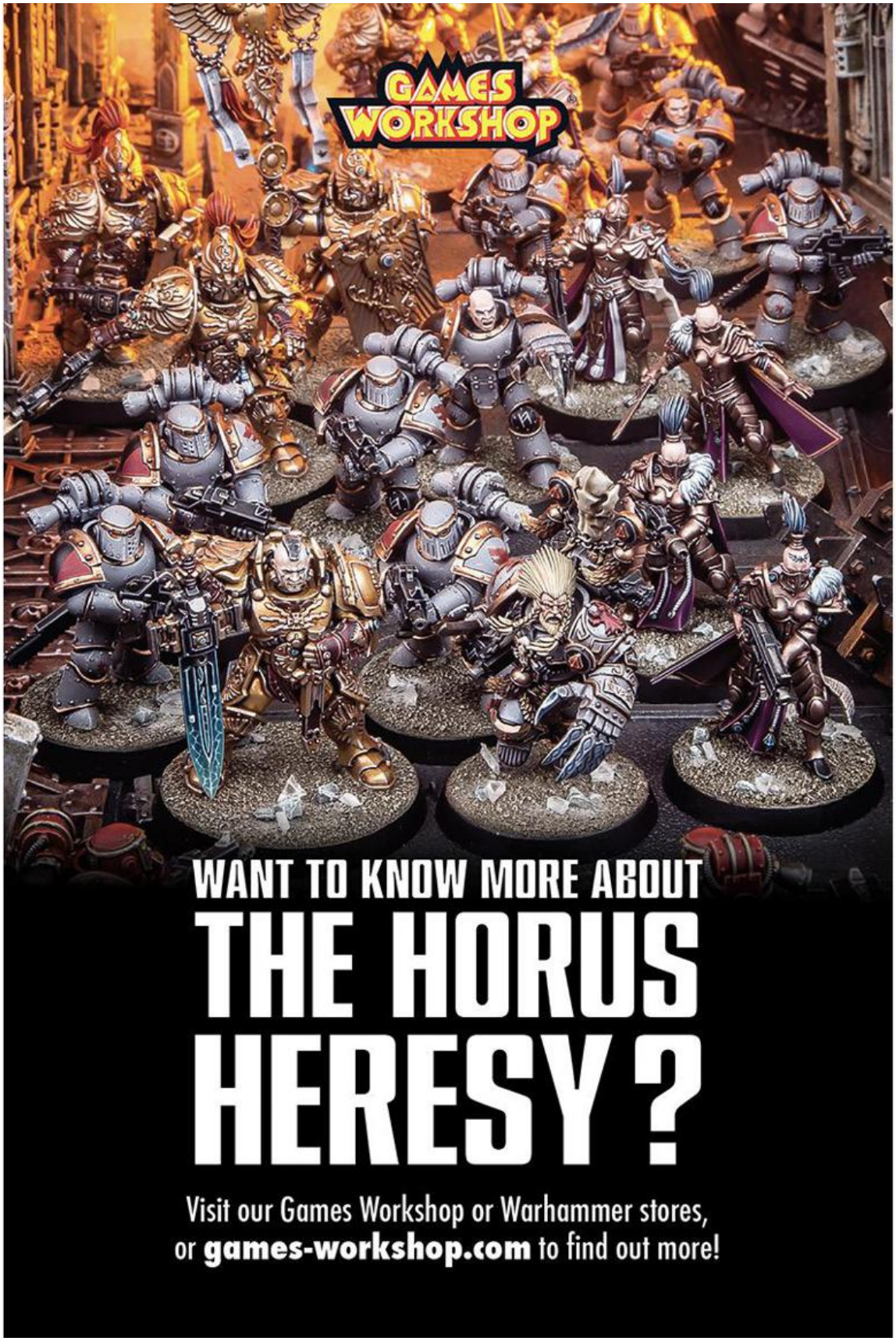
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for all the things you taught me in the Room.

And to Evan, who every day teaches me something new.

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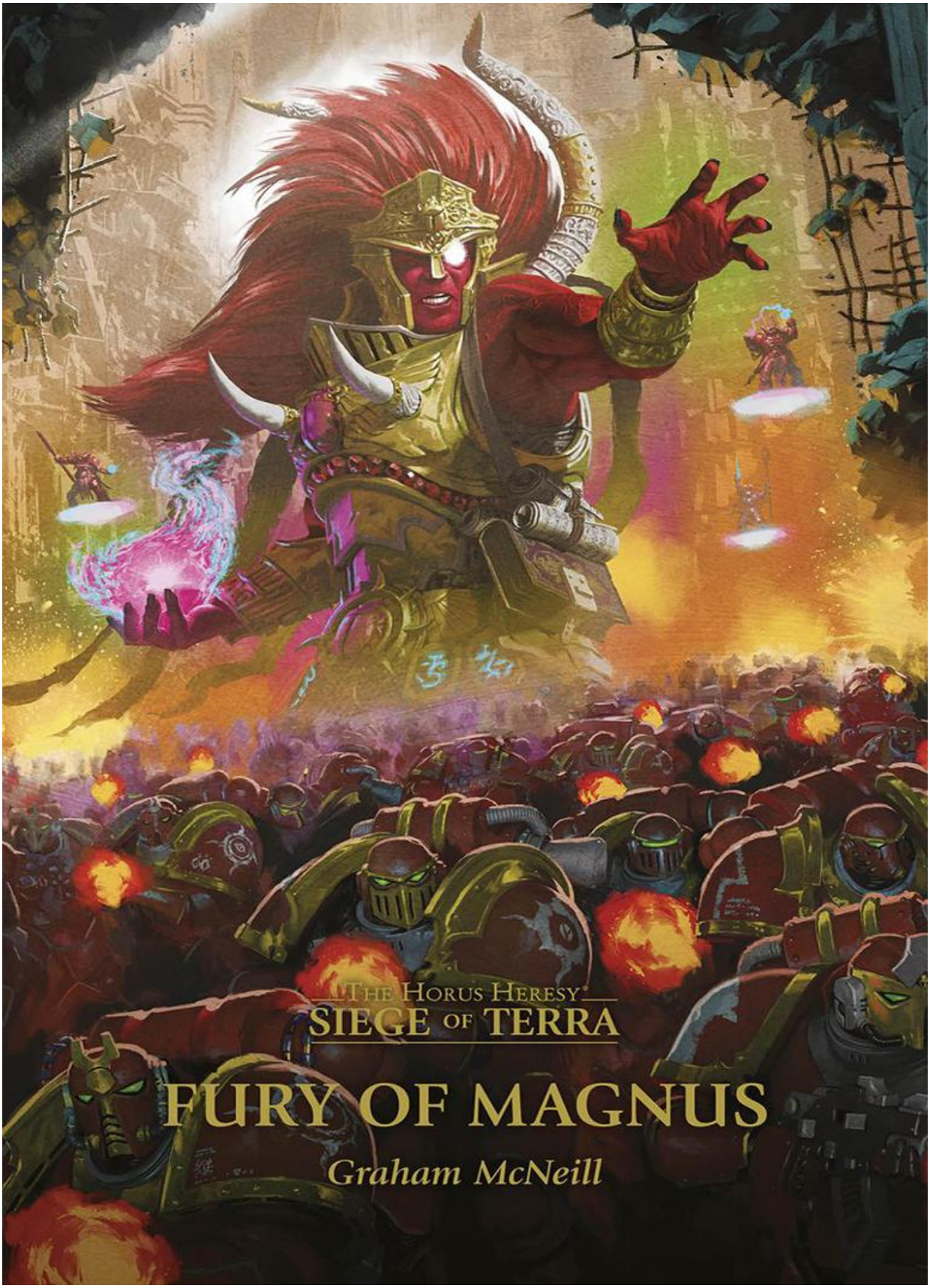
The Horus Heresy
Siege of Terra
Fury of Magnus
Graham McNeill

Document Outline

- Cover
- Backlist
- Title Page
- The Horus Heresy: Siege of Terra
  - Dramatis Personae
  - Book One
  - One
  - Two
  - Three
  - Four
  - Book Two
  - Five
  - Six
  - Seven
  - Book Three
  - Eight
  - Nine
  - Book Four
  - Ten
  - Eleven
  - Twelve
  - Book Five
  - Thirteen
  - Fourteen
  - Fifteen
  - Sixteen
  - Afterword
- About the Author
- An Extract from ‘Saturnine’
- A Black Library Publication
- eBook license

Table of Contents

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
The Horus Heresy: Siege of Terra
- Dramatis Personae
- Book One
- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- Book Two
- Five
- Six
- Seven
- Book Three
- Eight
- Nine
- Book Four
- Ten
- Eleven
- Twelve
- Book Five
- Thirteen
- Fourteen
- Fifteen
- Sixteen
- Afterword

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